

STAR  
WARSTM



# STAR WARS™

## Tales

Tales from the Empire

Tales from the New Republic



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Star Wars: Tales from the New Republic  
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**Includes**

**Tales from the Empire  
&  
Tales from the New Republic**

## STAR WARS Timeline



### DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**25,793** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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Volume Nine: Demon  
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**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC**  
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**3,951** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**3,678** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**3,653** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**3,645** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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*The Old Republic*  
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#### THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

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**1,032** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**1,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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*Darth Bane*  
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**53** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**44** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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The Dark Rival  
The Hidden Past  
The Mark of the Crown  
The Defenders of the Dead  
The Uncertain Path  
The Captive Temple  
The Day of Reckoning  
The Fight for Truth  
The Shattered Peace  
Special Edition: Deceptions

**43** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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The Dangerous Rescue

**41** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
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**28** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
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**25** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
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**24** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
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Volume Three: Screams of the Void

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**25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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**40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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Volume Seven: Storms  
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Volume Nine: Monster  
Volume Ten: Extremes

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# STAR WARS

## TALES FROM THE EMPIRE



Stories from STAR WARS®  
Adventure Journal

edited by  
**Peter Schweighofer**



**BANTAM**

New York Toronto London Sydney Auckland





**For Mom, Dad, and David, who caught  
me when I stumbled, encouraged me  
when I struggled, and smiled when I  
succeeded.**



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# **INTRODUCTION**

## **A Galaxy Filled with Stories**

### **by Peter Schweighofer**

Behind every book there is a story—one contained not in the words on the pages but in the events that occurred as an imaginative spark grew to become a published work of fiction. The cast of characters includes writers, editors, original ideas, and a lot of work. This anthology is no exception, but the real story has much deeper origins.

Not so long ago, a blockbuster film brought a new generation back to the silver screen. George Lucas combined cutting-edge special effects with exciting characters and themes, capturing the collective mythic consciousness of moviegoers. Once again viewers were treated to the Saturday-matinee experience: swashbuckling characters, edge-of-your-seat cliffhangers, spaceship dogfights, the forces of good battling the minions of evil. The film was *Star Wars: A New Hope*, and nobody had seen anything quite like it before.

In homes across America, the *Star Wars* universe became real. Children of every age returned from movie theaters with dreams of becoming Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, or Princess Leia. They bought action figures that allowed them to invent their own

stories, continuing the war against the evil Empire. Kids dreamed of what they would find in Mos Eisley and wondered what the spice mines of Kessel were like, or what creatures lurked in the Massassi temples on Yavin 4. They pretended to be brave Rebel pilots flying X-wing starfighters or dashing smugglers blasting through Imperial blockades in the *Millennium Falcon*.

*The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* continued to fuel America's imagination. Novels and comic books explored events that occurred before and between the films. In their imaginations, kids turned their basements into the Death Star, where they battled with lightsabers like Ben Kenobi and Darth Vader. They built fortresses in the snow and refought the Battle of Hoth with snowballs. Children romped through the park with toy blasters, pretending they were fighting scout troopers on Endor.

Nobody was sure whether *Star Wars* was just another fad or something truly original. Despite their popularity, the films drifted off into the haze of American society's collective memory in the mid to late 1980s. The Kenner action figures of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader were stored away in closets, basements, and attics. Sound tracks, scratched from numerous hours of play, were packed away with other old records. Novelizations were shelved with other science-fiction paperbacks and forgotten.

Other pursuits soon took the place of playing with action figures, reading comic books, and visiting the imaginary *Star Wars* galaxy. Fans grew up, went off to college, and entered the "real world" of career and family. The kids inside them were still there, but they were hidden in the deep closets, basements, and attics of the spirit. Sure, fans were glued to their television sets when the *Star Wars* films were broadcast on cable or the networks; for the most part, though, the wonder and excitement that had been *Star Wars* passed into little more than a fond recollection.

Then something amazing began.

New *Star Wars* stories appeared.



Timothy Zahn led the charge with *Heir to the Empire*. He enthralled fans in a tale packed with powerful villains, new worlds, mysterious aliens, massive starship battles, and, of course, everyone's favorite heroes from the movies. He brought back the magic that was *Star Wars*.

Timothy Zahn's popular books were followed by Dark Horse Comics series and more novels. Suddenly *Star Wars* was again on everyone's lips. Fans stormed book and comic stores looking for the latest releases.

There were rumors of new action figures. *Star Wars* trading cards returned with vivid original artwork. People realized there was even a role-playing game that would allow them to return to the days when they pretended to be Rebels battling stormtroopers and bounty hunters.

This new vision of *Star Wars* attracted new fans and reawakened that old *Star Wars* spirit—that kid who played with the action figures and wanted to become a Jedi Knight reemerged. Suddenly all the memorabilia was pulled out of storage, resurrecting the fond memories and dreams of a galaxy far, far away. Adults gazed longingly at the Magic Marker sketches of the Death Star battle they had drawn when they were children. They proudly displayed their collection of action figures. People reminisced about the first time they saw *Star Wars* and speculated about the fascinating territory a new trilogy would explore.

For twenty years, the fans kept the dream alive in their hearts—without a new trilogy or numerous reruns of television episodes. *Star Wars* is larger than the movies, greater than the fans. *Star Wars* is proof that spirited individuals can make a difference against seemingly insurmountable odds.

We are all part of this phenomenon.

The example of West End Games illustrates the nature of the *Star Wars* phenomenon. During the lull in *Star Wars* interest, this

small game company decided that the ultimate space fantasy offered the perfect subject for a role-playing game. At the time West End Games—then based in New York City—had produced a fair share of war games and role-playing games. The company had only tested the waters of licensed properties with *Star Trek: The Adventure Game* and a *Ghostbusters* role-playing game. West End contacted Lucasfilm Ltd. and a licensing agreement was arranged.

Trying to create a successful game based on a ten-year-old film was a major risk. But the West End design team went to work, and soon produced a rule book and sourcebook packed with information on characters, starships, weapons, aliens, and droids. The *Star Wars Role-playing Game* was born.

At first, West End produced several game products, which the *Star Wars* role-playing market gobbled up. There were plenty of obstacles to overcome. Deadlines were missed and production schedules were lengthened by authors who delivered projects late and editors who were forced to rewrite manuscripts. Working with the Lucasfilm approvals staff, West End quickly learned what subjects were off-limits: for instance, the Old Republic, Clone Wars, and how the Emperor and Vader rose to power.

Since then, West End has helped expand the *Star Wars* galaxy and maintain continuity through the release of more than seventy-five sourcebooks, adventures, and supplements, including twelve Galaxy Guides, fourteen *Star Wars Adventure Journals*, and ten sourcebooks based on best-selling novels and comics.

The company's hard work and perseverance has paid off. Thanks to *Star Wars*, West End established itself as a leader in the role-playing-game industry, acquiring other popular media licenses; it has since produced role-playing games based on the *Indiana Jones* films, *Tank Girl*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Men in Black*. Today it continues to be the most successful licensing role-playing company in the world.

But West End's work with *Star Wars* hasn't been confined to the role-playing-game field. The company has coordinated its efforts with Lucasfilm and other *Star Wars* licensees to guarantee the continuity and retain the spirit of *Star Wars* in its products. West End editors have offered assistance to authors, answering questions, providing game books for reference, and even reading over rough drafts of novels. Game sourcebooks have provided technical data used in creating toys and other products based on starships and vehicles. West End staffers helped guide the creation of Decipher's *Star Wars Customiz*i Card Game and Parker Brothers' *Star Wars Monopoly*. When the information contained in different products all fits together seamlessly, the *Star Wars* universe seems much more real.

Several West End designers have even moved into the greater *Star Wars* publishing universe. Bill Slavicsek updated Raymond Velasco's *Guide to the Star Wars Universe*, incorporating many new additions that maintain continuity with Timothy Zahn's novels, the new comic books, and West End Games sourcebooks. Bill Smith wrote the *Essential Guide to Vehicles and Vessels*. Other West End editors have contributed articles to Topps's *Star Wars Galaxy Magazine* and other periodicals. Like the movie heroes, these dedicated fans rose from humble beginnings to help shape the *Star Wars* galaxy.

Although the role-playing game might not be as popular or well-known as other *Star Wars* licensed products, a dedicated team of writers still works diligently to guide the role-playing adventures of fans as they explore the galaxy.

Some of you might be wondering exactly what a role-playing game is, and why *Star Wars* is so well suited to its purposes.

Simply, a role-playing game is just a more sophisticated version of the children's game "Let's Pretend." Most fans remember when they used to create their own *Star Wars* adventures, using action figures, a few vehicles, and the living-room furniture. Role-playing games are based on those same creative and imaginative processes.

Role-playing games involve interactive storytelling. A group of friends assumes the various roles of characters in the story, and their choices and actions affect the tale's outcome.

One of these players, the "gamemaster," tells the others what their characters see and hear, and portrays any "supporting cast members" the heroes encounter. Sometimes maps, game pieces, props, and miniature vehicles are used, but most of the action takes place in the participants' imaginations. The outcomes of blaster fights, speeder chases, and other conflicts are decided by simple rules involving the rolling of dice: the better the player rolls, the more successfully his character completes a particular task. Whether a character succeeds or fails at these challenges can dramatically change the story's outcome.

Since the participants are creating their own *Star Wars* stories, they don't play the actual characters from the films—instead, they create someone like them. Players might choose to be smugglers and Wookiees like Han Solo and Chewbacca. They can be starfighter pilots like Biggs or Dutch, or they can pretend to be aliens like Admiral Ackbar and Bib Fortuna. Since they're not using the movie characters, players may visit places and do things "offscreen." The *Star Wars Role-playing Game* allows fans to explore fascinating areas only hinted at in the films: those other back alleys in Mos Eisley, the white corridors of Cloud City, the Forest Moon of Endor. It lets people create their own *Star Wars* adventures, complete with heroes and villains, planets, starships, and aliens.

The aim of the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* is the same: to explore the offscreen characters, planets, conflicts, and stories that fill the *Star Wars* universe.

When West End started publishing the *Journal* in 1994, the goal was to create a periodical to support the role-playing game with exciting new stories, game adventures, and *Star Wars* source material. Under the careful supervision of Lucy Wilson, Sue

Rostoni, and Allan Kausch in Lucasfilm's licensing department, the *Journal* quickly grew into a forum for both established and up-and-coming authors to continue visiting the fascinating *Star Wars* universe.

Before the *Journal*, *Star Wars* publishing was very exclusive. Only established authors were invited to contribute to a Bantam novel or anthology. Most had solid contacts in the publishing industry. Writers who had never published a science-fiction novel or two were not considered.

Novels focused on the major heroes, though the anthologies developed some of the background characters from the films more fully. Everyone wanted stories about Luke, Han, and Leia, but the concept of basing a novel on new characters without the main *Star Wars* heroes in the spotlight was risky. Would readers buy it?

Authors were permitted to introduce original characters to interact with the major heroes, but once their works were published, the events they narrated became a part of *Star Wars* continuity. Writers who created new characters had no other opportunities to develop them unless they were specifically assigned to write future novels. Some authors longed to return to play in the fascinating *Star Wars* universe.

The *Star Wars Adventure Journal* began to change all that.

Over time, the *Journal* became a place where qualified writers from all backgrounds could publish original *Star Wars* fiction. Every author's bibliography and fiction samples were scrutinized by West End and Lucasfilm—only those whose work was approved received invitations to contribute. Not every submission was accepted. Every article had to live up to West End's and Lucasfilm's high quality standards. The *Journal* was never a fanzine, although some of its authors had experience writing for such publications. It was a showcase for the best new *Star Wars* material available.

At first the *Journal* didn't emphasize short stories—they shared the 288 pages with game adventures and source material. Such

regular features as “Galaxywide News-Nets,” “Smuggler’s Log,” and “Wanted by Cracken” introduced new characters, starships, planets, aliens, and conflicts in the *Star Wars* universe, and offered ways to use them in the role-playing game. At the time of their publication in the *Journal*, all fiction pieces contained game information and sidebars offering tips for integrating elements from short stories into the game.

Subsequent issues unveiled the works of more polished authors and a rising level of excellence. At Lucasfilm’s encouragement—and due to the increase in the quality of short-story submissions—the number of fiction articles grew.

The *Journal* became a source for *Star Wars* short stories inhabited by characters other than those familiar to fans of the movies. It was one of the few places where authors without a novel under their belt could officially write new *Star Wars* fiction. A generation of new writers created their own heroes: CorSec agents, cynical smugglers, rogue Dark Jedi, Rebel commando teams. Established authors returned to their favorite characters and created new ones. Everyone had a chance to roam around the universe they knew and loved.

The *Journal* created a whole series of *Star Wars* stories that set off into unexplored territory. It gave authors a special opportunity to write for their favorite film setting and expand the scope of the *Star Wars* galaxy.

I spent my childhood playing with *Star Wars* action figures, listening to the sound tracks, collecting trading cards, and reading novels and comic books. These kept the characters and myths of the movie alive in my imagination at a time when household VCRs were still rare. The *Star Wars* records—which appealed to my love for music—sparked images of the film in my mind. The trading cards brought movie scenes and characters back to life. Comic books developed plots and characters beyond the end of the film. The action figures helped me tell my own stories. My

interest in *Star Wars* survived through the long years of waiting for *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*.

As I grew older, though, I soon found other pursuits to occupy my time. One of those was a strange new hobby called “role-playing games.” Several kids in my neighborhood started playing something called Dungeons and Dragons. I watched them play once and it didn’t seem too hard. Instead of wondering where I could buy a copy, I created my own fantasy role-playing game for my friends. It wasn’t particularly ingenious, nor did it capture the complexities that were to appear in current role-playing games—but it was fun. Eventually I bought Dungeons and Dragons, the first of many role-playing games in practically every genre: fantasy, science fiction, historical. These provided an outlet for my creativity. I enjoyed running games for friends and creating my own adventures.

The *Star Wars* films fostered an interest in science fiction and fantasy literature that followed me into high school. All my spare money was used to purchase science fiction novels in the local bookstore. I read Moorcock’s *Elric* series, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, and anything by Larry Niven. All this reading inspired me to dream up my own characters, worlds, and technologies, which eventually appeared in my own (admittedly mediocre) sci-fi stories.

I combined my role-playing-game and science-fiction hobbies by creating my own simple science-fiction board games, complete with intricate maps, counters, and cards. My friends and I played them often, though we didn’t think they’d amount to much in the long term. How often does having fun develop into a lucrative career?

When I reached college age, I was determined to hone my writing skills and put them to use penning science-fiction epics of my own. Throughout my years at Hamilton College, I dabbled in science fiction—reading a lot of it and writing some of my own (better by now). I broadened my writing and publishing experience by reporting and typesetting for the college

newspaper. My creative-writing professors encouraged me to explore other areas, such as poetry and historical fiction (which eventually became another hobby of mine). I even tested my organizational skills by coordinating the Hamilton College Writers Society.

During one summer vacation, I discovered treasure buried in the science-fiction shelves of the local bookstore: the *Star Wars Role-playing Game*. Two of my favorite hobbies—*Star Wars* and role-playing—had been merged. I bought the book on the spot.

Over the next few years, my friends and I occasionally explored the *Star Wars* role-playing universe during game sessions. We created our own legendary characters—heroes like the outlaw Dirk Harkness, and villains like the mysterious bounty hunter Beylyssa. Through our imaginations, we explored strange planets, escaped carefully laid Imperial traps, and blasted stormtroopers at every turn. For a few nights between semesters, *Star Wars* lived again in the minds of our gaming crew.

The *Star Wars Role-playing Game* was just that: a game, a pleasant pastime to fill college breaks, a hobby left over from childhood. Most childhood diversions, however, eventually crumble under the intimidating weight of the “real world,” and with graduation from college, I was prepared to succumb to the inevitable nine-to-five drudgery of the workplace. No matter how much I loved *Star Wars* and role-playing, they could never provide me with a viable career. Not that I didn’t try, mind you. I sent a few resumes out to game companies, including West End, but, as is often the case, most companies required a few years’ experience in the industry. I had to start at one of the lower rungs on the publishing ladder.

As a recently graduated creative-writing major, I was well suited for a job in journalism: reporting for my hometown weekly newspaper was the only publishing job I could find. I spent two years reporting on town meetings, school events, and interesting people in the community. While this doesn’t sound glamorous, I absorbed things every writer and editor should



know. I learned how to meet deadlines, how to revise my writing to make it clear and exciting, and how to choose words and organize paragraphs to express my ideas clearly.

After two years, I was promoted to editor in chief when the previous editor stepped down. This new job quickly taught me how to be a team leader. Now I was critiquing reporters' stories, working with them to produce great articles. I got a crash course in public relations as I was forced to deal with the innumerable publicity seekers who plague small newspapers with their personal agendas, political crusades, and town-government conspiracy theories.

Although I was living at home, I was close to my *Star Wars* gaming friends. We continued our fantastic adventures through the Outer Rim Territories, freeing aliens from despotic slavers, infiltrating secret Imperial research bases, and escorting undercover Rebel agents on luxurious starliners.

We soon discovered we were not alone in our passion for *Star Wars*. A new novel called *Heir to the Empire* seemed to herald the dawn of a new *Star Wars* age. New comic books also began to appear. As soon as we heard that another Timothy Zahn *Star Wars* novel had been published, we ran to the bookstore. Our gaming crew scanned the new comic-book releases for *Star Wars* material. We were not alone in the universe—*Star Wars* fans everywhere were emerging from their slumber.

Change was in the air, and I began to think that if I could find the right job in the gaming industry, I'd be able to realize my dream of combining *Star Wars*, writing, and role-playing games.

With a year's worth of editing experience under my belt, I decided to try breaking into the gaming industry again. My first choice was West End for two reasons: the company was only three hours from my home in Connecticut, and it possessed the license for my favorite film-related role-playing game.

After I mailed my resume and made a few phone calls, I was invited to meet West End's senior staffers and managers in their nondescript brown warehouse/office in rural northeastern

Pennsylvania. I walked into the interview carrying a folder with my resume and a few samples of my newspaper work. I also brought along a positive attitude and my love for *Star Wars* ... and when I left the office, I was editor of the *Star Wars Adventure Journal*.

Since that day four years ago, I've worked with many authors. Some proved to be up-and-coming writers, others were *New York Times* best-selling *Star Wars* authors. Most suffered through my long, meticulous critique letters and rambling phone conversations. I hope some have learned to become better writers through our work.

Many of the new authors could have been viewed as risks. A beginning writer's work often needs more polishing than a story by an experienced author, but the end result is often well worth the effort. The *Journal* is proof that these risks have paid off. Those who made it through the months of writing, waiting, and revision have added their names to the growing list of published *Star Wars* authors.

In this anthology, you'll meet some of them.

My first mission in establishing the *Journal* was to find a *New York Times* best-selling author to create a story for the premiere issue. West End had developed a good rapport with Timothy Zahn, whose novels were already the inspiration for two game sourcebooks. I contacted Tim, who turned out to be extremely friendly and willing to help. At the time, he was not scheduled to write any more *Star Wars* novels—this story assignment would be a chance for him to return to some of his favorite characters.

Though he wanted to develop his archvillain, Grand Admiral Thrawn, Tim decided to write a background story for Talon Karrde. (Tim would investigate bits of Thrawn's past in subsequent *Journal* stories—"Mist Encounter" in *Journal* 7 and "Command Decision" in *Journal* 11.) "First Contact" revealed some of Talon Karrde's activities before the time covered by *Heir*

*to the Empire*, confirming the smuggler's penchant for cleverly naming his starships along the way. The story is a brilliant display of Tim's ability to lead readers through a complex and devious tale packed with surprises.

After "First Contact," Tim contributed to other West End Games *Star Wars* products, including the *DarkStryder* campaign. Although he'd never worked on role-playing games before, Tim participated in several charity games where he has portrayed Talon Karrde and Grand Admiral Thrawn. He proved to be just as devious and scheming in role-playing games as he is in his fiction.

Convincing Timothy Zahn to write for the *Journal* was the first challenge. The next was to encourage other mainstream authors to contribute. Kathy Tyers was an obvious choice. After *The Truce at Bakura*, she had stayed active in *Star Wars* publishing through the various anthologies, just finishing a short story for the then-unpublished *Star Wars: Tales of the Bounty Hunters* anthology. She wanted to do more with a character she created for that story: Tinian Patt.

While "Tinian on Trial" was characteristic *Star Wars* fare, with its aliens and stormtroopers, Kathy's fiction treated many deeper emotional themes involving sacrifice, love, and freedom. Readers were also treated to a sneak peek at the story to come in *Tales of the Bounty Hunters*, which wasn't published until all three Tinian stories appeared in the *Journal*.

Michael A. Stackpole also offered the *Journal* a preview of his upcoming *Star Wars* fiction—"Missed Chance" appeared six months before *Rogue Squadron* went on sale. Mike's *X-Wing* books showed that characters other than the main heroes could support an entire novel. Mike has been combining game worlds and fiction for many years working in the role-playing-game industry since it began in the 1970s. Besides writing numerous game adventures, he's authored several novels based in role-playing settings for the Dark Conspiracy and BattleTech games. He's a

good example of an author with promise making it in the major leagues of publishing.

While working with mainstream science-fiction writers was exciting, discovering talented new authors was truly rewarding. They were struggling to balance career and writing, hammering out short stories in their spare time. These people were the *Star Wars* fans who could be the notable science-fiction writers of the future.

I first met one of these, Patricia A. Jackson, at Sci-Con, a science-fiction convention in Virginia Beach, where she was rather outspoken during a panel discussion on freelance writing, and she later turned up when I ran a *Star Wars* role-playing-game adventure. Two weeks later, a manuscript turned up on my desk: a *Star Wars* story patched together from the characters and events of our game. I quickly learned that role-playing-game adventures—though they’re fun while you’re playing them—do not automatically make good short stories.

But Patty would not be discouraged. Her next story had a solid first draft, and was revised until it was fit for publication. It was the first of many fiction submissions. She was particularly proud of “The Final Exit,” a story whose foreboding atmosphere closely matches the personality of Dark Jedi Adalric Brandl. Patty has become one of the *Journal’s* regular contributors. We still see each other at gaming and science-fiction conventions, and the two of us run a small writers workshop every year at Sci-Con.

Charlene Newcomb had contributed to every *Journal* when “A Certain Point of View” appeared. Up to then, all her stories had focused on a character she created called Alex Winger, the daughter of an Imperial Governor who was secretly working to free her planet from the Empire. Before “Point of View,” Charlene finished the latest Alex Winger story and was wondering where to go from there. To help inspire her, I sent her a copy of a painting that had once adorned an old *Star Wars* game adventure. It showed a ship’s officer and several aliens playing a hologame.

I told Charlene to write a story involving this scene so I could feature the color artwork in the *Journal*. She went to work and submitted “A Certain Point of View,” in the plot of which she managed to highlight several elements of the painting. Framed by a large viewport, the picture reveals a greenish nebula swirling in the distance: a hazardous section of space called the Maelstrom. One of the aliens represented in it holds a large goblet—the helmet of an approaching stormtrooper is reflected in its glassy surface. In her story, Charlene even integrated source material about the Maelstrom and the starliner that originally appeared in the game adventure. The story provides a nice bridge between short fiction and previously published game material.

Most *Journal* authors concentrate on one area: source material, game adventures, or short stories. Tony Russo covered all the bases. His source articles have taken readers to Sevarcos, a world of Imperial prisons and swashbuckling spice lords, introduced them to an elite mercenary commando team, and explored the tyrannical holdings of the Pentastar Alignment. In his adventure, players had to try to free a frontier colony from the iron grasp of a crime lord. His story “Blaze of Glory” successfully combined the excitement and character interaction of a game adventure with source material about a commando team, all in the form of a short story.

Erin Endom, who practices and teaches pediatric emergency medicine, merged her medical knowledge and the drama of her job in a *Journal* story. “Do No Harm” is a good example of how new fiction can focus on and explore facets of the *Star Wars* universe otherwise glimpsed just offscreen. While many stories focus on Rebel commandos making desperate raids against Imperial forces, few contemplate the emotions of normally peaceful people who injure and kill others in battle. By demonstrating the conflict within a combat medic charged with saving lives, Erin brought a different perspective to the war between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance.

Angela Phillips also provided a new perspective on the *Star Wars* universe with her story “Slaying Dragons.” Her young heroine, Shannon, has ambitions similar to characters in the *Star Wars* films—to rise from humble beginnings and make a difference in the galaxy. Her story is notable for its merging of the medieval theme of dragon slaying and the movie mystique of the noble Jedi Knights.

Laurie Burns started by using her experience as a newspaper reporter in her *Journal* story “Kella Rand Reporting.” By the time she submitted “Retreat from Coruscant,” she had moved on to integrating her characters into the more significant events in the *Star Wars* chronology. She chose to involve her independent courier in the New Republic’s flight from Coruscant that occurred just before events in Dark Horse Comics’ *Dark Empire* series. In writing, Laurie did her homework—while fitting her fiction into existing continuity, she included appearances by Garm Bel Iblis, Mara Jade, and Colonel Jak Bremen, characters Timothy Zahn created in his *Star Wars* trilogy.

That is perhaps one of the most exciting parts of working on the *Journal*: expanding the breadth of the *Star Wars* universe. Since it’s a licensed publication, all the material becomes an official part of the continuity. Where else could a kid with a wild imagination and dreams of writing science fiction create stories based on the most popular films of all time? Stories that unfold in a galaxy where two bantering droids deliver plans for an Imperial super weapon, where a scoundrel smuggler becomes a selfless hero, and where a simple moisture farmer is transformed into the last Jedi Knight.

This anthology is the culmination of four years of adventure. Like the throne-room scene at the end of *Star Wars*, it is certainly not the end of the saga, only a momentary triumph before we return to work. As *Journal* editor, I do not stand alone; I’ve been blessed to work with some very talented individuals from across the *Star Wars* licensing universe. Like any epic adventure, we meet important people along the way who help us achieve our

goals. The *Journal* owes a lot to those heroes working behind the scenes. West End's Richard Hawran, Jeff Kent, and Daniel Scott Palter have provided support and much-needed encouragement as the *Journal* grew from an idea to an illustrated, 288-page quarterly magazine. None of this would have been possible without the imaginative vision and perseverance of George Lucas. Lucasfilm's Sue Rostoni helped guide the *Journal's* initial format and content, while Allan Kausch continued his meticulous patrol over continuity and quality. Timothy Zahn, Kathy Tyers, and Michael A. Stackpole have delighted readers (and editors) with stories in which they return to the characters and galaxy they love. Up-and-coming authors have contributed stories that expand the *Star Wars* galaxy's scope and still live up to Lucasfilm's standards of excellence.

The *Journal* has been a place where writers can realize their *Star Wars* dreams. These authors have risen from their humble beginnings to make a difference—however small in the grand scope of the *Star Wars* universe—in the galaxy far, far away they love so much. They all have stories to tell, tales that began as playful musings and imaginative romps through George Lucas's *Star Wars* playground.

You're about to read some.

# First Contact

## by Timothy Zahn

With a last sizzle of jittering repulsorlifts, the space yacht *Uwana Buyer* settled down into the landing field that had been hacked out of the Varonat jungle. “What a fine, civilized-looking place this is,” Quelev Tapper commented, peering out the cockpit canopy. “You sure we didn’t overshoot and land in someone’s weed dump?”

Talon Karrde looked out at the pale yellow trees encircling the field and the thirty or so dilapidated buildings nestled in beneath them. “No, this is it,” he assured his lieutenant. “The Great Jungle of Varonat. Home of a handful of third-rate trading depots and a few thousand colonists who haven’t the brains to pick up and go elsewhere.”

“And an ugly Krish named Gamgalon,” Tapper said. “I don’t know, Karrde. I still think we should have brought in the *Wild Karrde* and *Starry Ice* and had some decent firepower behind us. We’re kind of like sitting mynocks here.”

“We’re here to observe, not make trouble,” Karrde reminded him, popping his restraints and standing up. “Gamgalon



wouldn't be bothering with these private Morodin-hunting safaris if there wasn't some big profit involved. I just want to know what he's up to, and whether we can carve a piece of it off for ourselves."

"All the more reason to have backup along," Tapper grumbled, checking the draw of his blaster as he followed Karrde to the hatchway aft. "But you're the boss."

"How very true. You ready?"

Tapper took a deep breath, exhaled it noisily. "Let's do it."

Karrde punched the control and the hatchway slid up into the hull. Sniffing at the exotic aromas, he and Tapper walked down the ramp and headed across the field toward a building with a faded *Port Facilities* sign hanging on it.

They were no more than halfway there when two men lounging beside another of the buildings peeled themselves away from their wall and moved casually to intercept the newcomers. "Howdy," one of them said as they got within earshot. "Welcome to Tropis-on-Varonat. Here for the sights?"

"That's very amusing," Karrde complimented him. "No, we're here for the hyperdrive mechanic we very much hope you have."

"Ah," the other said, glancing back at the *Uwana Buyer*. "Yeah, I'm not surprised. The flashier the hull, the more crumbish the innards."

"Save the colorful language for the tourists," Tapper growled. "You have a hyperdrive mechanic here or don't you?"

The other eyed him a moment, then turned back to Karrde. "Your friend's a little short on manners," he said.

"He makes up for it in ability," Karrde said, pulling a handful of high-denomination coins from his pocket and sorting ostentatiously through them. "And in the understanding of schedules. We have some highly important business waiting for us on Svivren."

"Sure, I understand," the other said. "No offense, ah—?"

“Syndic Pandis Hart of the Sif-Uwana Council,” Karrde identified himself. “This is my pilot, Captain Seoul.” He chose one of the coins, held it up. “And we’re rather in a hurry.”

“Hey, no problem,” the man grinned, jerking a thumb toward the port facilities building as he deftly took the coin from Karrde’s hand. “Buzzy, go tell ’em they’ve got a customer. Rush job.”

His companion nodded silently and loped off toward the building. “Name’s Fleck, Syndic,” the man continued. “Offhand, I’d say you’re going to be stuck here for a few days. Got any plans?”

Karrde glanced pointedly around. “Would there be any plans worth having?”

“Matter of fact, there would,” Fleck said. “Fellow here runs a pretty neat safari out into the jungle—got a trip heading out first thing tomorrow morning, in fact. Ever hear of Morodins?”

“I don’t think so,” Karrde said. “Big game?”

“The biggest,” Fleck assured him. “Giant lizard-slug things, ten to twenty meters long. Make great wall or hallway trophies.” His lip twitched sardonically. “They’re not too fast or mean, either. Good way for a beginner to start.”

“That’s comforting to hear.” Karrde looked at Tapper. “What do you think, Seoul?”

“Doesn’t sound too dangerous, sir,” Tapper said with just the right note of concern. “I trust you wouldn’t be going alone?”

“Naw, there’s four other hunters signed up,” Fleck said. “And the boss always takes a couple of escorts along as guards. Safe as in a snuggy.”

“I’d still recommend I accompany you, sir,” Tapper persisted. “I used to be pretty good with a BlasTech A280.”

“Let’s find out first how much it costs to be as safe as in a snuggy,” Karrde said dryly.

“Hardly anything,” Fleck sniffed. “Not to a gentleman of your means. Only twelve thousand each.”

Karrde smiled. “A man of means doesn’t stay there by throwing money away. Fifteen thousand for the both of us.”

Fleck grinned. “Hard bargainer, huh? Make it twenty.”

“Experienced businessman,” Karrde corrected. “Make it seventeen.”

The other’s forehead wrinkled, then cleared. “All right. Seventeen it is.”

“Very good,” Karrde said. “When do we leave?”

“Five-half tomorrow morning,” Fleck said. “Just be here—I’ll tell the boss you’re coming. Don’t forget to bring the seventeen.” He pointed across the field. “You can get outfitted over at that building over there, and get a room for the night in the hotel next door. It’s, uh, nicer inside than it looks.”

“One would hope so,” Karrde agreed. “I trust no one will be offended if we pass on the accommodations. The outfitters will know what equipment we’ll need?”

“Sure,” Fleck nodded. “Like I said, the boss runs these safaris all the time.”

“Very good,” Karrde said. “Come, Seoul, let’s go see what they have to offer.”

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Varonat’s sun was beginning to settle down behind the jungle by the time Karrde and Tapper finally made it back to the *Uwana Buyer* with their purchases. “I hope we gave them enough time,” Tapper commented as they climbed up the ramp.

“I’m sure we did,” Karrde said. “It doesn’t take long for a professional to search a ship this size. And I’m not expecting Gamgalon to be employing amateurs.”

Abruptly, Tapper touched Karrde’s arm. “Maybe he is,” he said, dropping his voice.

Karrde frowned. Then he heard it: a muffled clank from the aft section of the ship. "Should we take a look?" Tapper murmured.

"It would look suspicious if we didn't," Karrde said, grimacing. If this whole thing fell apart through the incompetence of Gamgalon's own people ... "Nice and easy."

Moving quietly, they headed down the central corridor to the engine room, hearing another clank as they reached the door. Karrde caught Tapper's eye, nodded. The other nodded back, lowering his bundles to the deck and getting a grip on his blaster. Karrde touched the release, and the door slid open—

The woman sitting on the floor beside the open access panel was young and attractive, with a cascade of red-gold hair tied back out of the way behind her head. Her face was calm and controlled as she looked up at their abrupt entrance; beneath her jumpsuit, her figure was slim and athletic and nicely formed.

And in her hands were a hydrosponder and one of the power flux connectors from the *Uwana Buyer's* hyperdrive. "Can I help you?" she asked coolly.

"I think you already are," Karrde said, the brief moment of surprise passing into relief. Gamgalon's searchers had not, in fact, fouled up. "I take it you're the hyperdrive mechanic."

"Cleverly deduced," she said. "Celina Marniss. You have any problems?"

"Only with the hyperdrive," Karrde said. "Why, were you expecting me to?"

Celina shrugged, returning her attention to the power flux connector. "I've known some men in my day who didn't think a woman could be decorative and competent at the same time."

"Personally, that's my favorite combination," Karrde told her.

She favored him with a look that was slightly amused, slightly strained-patient. "So you're Syndic Hart. Buzzy was most impressed with you."

"I'm ever so pleased," Karrde said. "I won't ask which way he was impressed." He nodded at the access opening. "Any idea yet what's wrong?"

"Well, for starters, your flux connectors are all about four degrees out of sync," Celina said, hefting the one in her hand. "They have to have been ignored for a long time to drift that far off."

"I see," Karrde said, his favorable first impression of this woman moving up another notch. Chin had assured him that the flux connector gimmicking would take an average hyperdrive mechanic at least a day to find. "I'll have to speak to my maintenance man."

"Personally, I'd fire him," Celina said. "I'll get these readjusted, then we can see what else is wrong."

"Good," Karrde said. "As Buzzy may have mentioned, we're in something of a hurry."

"Funny way to go about it," she said, nodding toward the packages in the corridor behind them. "Gamgalon's safaris usually take upwards of four days."

"It's been my experience that a failed hyperdrive normally takes at least six to ten days to fix," Karrde said.

"Possibly another reason to fire your mechanic," Celina grunted. "I'm guessing I can do it in two or three."

"What makes you think we're going on a safari?" Tapper asked suspiciously.

"The packages, for a start," Celina told him. "Besides, you're obviously well-off, and you talked to Fleck. He's Gamgalon's chief come-up flector—does his job pretty well." She shrugged, turning her attention back to the flux connector. "Besides, what else is there to do around here?"

"Cleverly deduced," Karrde said. "You're wrong about my personal wealth, though. I'm merely chief purchasing agent for the Sif-Uwana Council."

"I'd call that a marginal distinction," Celina commented. "Certainly given the casual way Sif-Uwanis approach management and money."

"Really," Karrde said, his estimation moving up yet another notch. He would have bet heavily that there wouldn't be a single person on Varonat who'd ever even heard of Sif-Uwana, let alone know anything about it. "Have you ever been there?"

"Once," Celina said. "It was a few years ago."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business."

"What sort?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "I don't recall an invitation to play Questions Three with you, Syndic."

"No offense intended," Karrde said. "I merely find your presence here intriguing. You seem too skilled and well-traveled to be stuck out here in the backwater of the Ison Corridor. Not to mention your other obvious attributes."

He'd hoped to spark some reaction, to shake up that calm facade of hers a bit. But she refused to turn to the lure. "Maybe I just like the peace and quiet," she countered. "Maybe I'm trying to raise a stake to get out." She locked eyes with him. Green eyes, Karrde noted distantly. A very striking green, at that. "Or maybe I'm hiding from something."

Karrde forced himself to meet that gaze. There was a smoldering, almost bitter fire behind those eyes, driven by a turbulent swirl of emotion. He'd been right: she was no simple backwater hyperdrive mechanic. "You certainly instill me with confidence," he managed.

The corner of her lip twitched upward in a sardonic smile; and abruptly the fire vanished as if it had never been there. Or had been nothing but an act. "Good," she said briskly. "Maybe next time you'll stay out of your hyperdrive mechanic's way and leave well enough alone."

"I take your point," Karrde said, bowing slightly. "We'll be in the forward living areas if you need to know where anything is. Good evening."

He gestured to Tapper, and together they backed out of the engine room, gathering up their packages again as the door slid closed. "What do you think?" Karrde asked as they headed forward.

"You're right, she doesn't fit here," the other agreed. "One of Gamgalon's people?"

"Probably," Karrde said. "Backup for Fleck, perhaps, or else just a general snoop. Mechanics and other servicepeople tend to be invisible."

"Maybe." Tapper glanced down the corridor behind them. "If you ask me, though, someone of her talents would be wasted in straight surveillance."

"Agreed," Karrde said, pursing his lips. "Could be she doubles as saboteur."

"Or as ship thief," Tapper said grimly. "Gamgalon's covering up *something* with these safaris."

They'd reached the yacht's lounge now. "Well, he can't steal this one without considerable effort," Karrde reminded him as he dumped his packages on the lounge couch. "As to sabotage; well, we should be able to ungimmick the hyperdrive in twenty minutes if we have to. And the *Wild Karrde* can be here in four hours if we need it."

"I take it that means you're still planning to bring a comm-relay along?"

"Very definitely," Karrde assured him. "But I'm not expecting we'll have to use it. My guess is that we're going to find the safaris are just Gamgalon's way of setting up clandestine smuggler meetings, and that Fleck and company are here to screen out any Imperial officials who might object to the proceedings. Come on, let's get this gear organized. Five-half is going to come early enough as it is."

The rest of the safari was already assembled by the time Karrde and Tapper emerged from the *Uwana Buyer* just before five-half the next morning. “Eclectic bunch,” Tapper commented as they walked toward the group and the three Aratech Arrow-17 airspeeders waiting on the field beside them.

“Agreed,” Karrde said, looking them over. A Thennqora, a Saffa, and two Duros, all resplendent in outfits and equipment as obviously fresh out of the box as the gear he and Tapper were wearing. Slightly off to one side, dressed in outfits that had just as obviously seen considerably more use, were a Krish, a Rodian, and Buzzy the laconic Human. “The group matches the escort,” he added.

Tapper nodded toward the Krish. “That’s not Gamgalon, is it?”

Karrde shook his head. “One of his lieutenants, I think. I doubt Gamgalon himself will be coming along.”

“Ah,” the Krish called, beaming about as cheerfully as it was physically possible for a Krish to manage as he beckoned toward Karrde and Tapper. “Welcome. You must be Syndic Hart. I am Falmal; I will lead your expedition.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Karrde nodded. “I trust we’re not late?”

“Not at all,” Falmal said. “The rest were merely early. May I present your fellow hunters: Tarnish—” he gestured to the Thennqora “—Hav and Jivis—” the Duros “—and Cob-caree—” the Saffa. “Gentlebeings: Syndic Hart and Captain Seoul of Sif-Uwana.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Karrde said, eyeing each of the others. None of the names were familiar, but of course that didn’t mean anything. He and Tapper weren’t using their correct names, either.

“We waste time,” Tamish growled. “Get on with the hunt, Falmal.”

“Certainly,” Falmal said. “If you will all find seats aboard?”



Karrde and Tapper chose one of the airspeeders and strapped in. A few minutes later Falmal climbed in beside their Krish pilot, and they were off.

“You run these safaris often?” Karrde asked as they flew low above the rippling yellow jungle.

“Only a few times per season.” Falmal threw him a speculative look. “You were fortunate indeed to have arrived when you did.”

Karrde gestured toward the rack of BlasTech rifles in the back of the airspeeder. “I’ll consider it fortunate only if we catch something,” he said. “I’m spending far too much money here for just a round-trip tour through a jungle.”

“You will be successful,” Falmal promised. “All are. Rest assured of that.”

They flew for an hour before putting down in a hilltop clearing. A small, semi-permanent looking camp had been built there, four buildings grouped around a burned-off landing area. “You must use this place a lot,” Karrde commented as they settled to the ground.

“It is the base camp for all safaris,” Falmal said. “Here the pilots and airspeeders will wait while we continue on foot. Take your packs and weapons, please. We will move out immediately.”

Ten minutes later they were all tromping along a barely discernible path through yellow trees, yellow-green bushes, and a pale violet ground cover that looked disturbingly like masses of fat worms. Falmal was in the lead, with Tamish, Karrde, and Tapper behind him. Buzzy was next, followed by Hav and Jivis and Cob-caree, with the Rodian bringing up the rear.

They traveled for nearly an hour before Falmal called a break in a small clearing that opened off beside the path. “Bit out of shape for this kind of exercise,” Karrde puffed as he got out of his pack and dropped it to the ground. “How far are we going today, Falmal?”

“Wearied so soon?” Falmal asked, throwing a sharp-toothed smile at him. “Not to worry, Syndic Hart. Three hours more, perhaps four, and we will be at the main hunting area.”

"Morodins have been here," Tamish grunted from behind him.

Karrde turned to look. The Thennqora was crouched down at the edge of the clearing, prodding with a knife at a patch of dark discoloration cutting across the ground cover. "Morodin slime was here," he said. "Several weeks old."

"Well observed," Falmal said approvingly. "It was two months ago that one of our safaris hunted Morodins through this region. Unfortunately, their migration pattern has since taken them further away."

"Wonder why we didn't land closer to begin with, then," Tapper muttered.

"Perhaps airspeeders spook our intended prey," Karrde suggested, frowning. A meter behind Tamish, along one edge of the slime mark, a neat row of short pinkish shoots was coming up from beneath a group of yellow-green bushes.

And in the shadows behind them was a glint of metal. Stepping around behind Tapper, he started over for a closer look—

"Time to go," Falmal called, slapping his hands briskly. "Packs on, all. We must continue if we are to reach our destination with enough time to begin a hunt."

Karrde considered checking out the metal thing anyway, decided against it, and returned to where he'd left his pack. "You are a botanist, Syndic Hart?" Falmal asked.

"No," Karrde said as Tapper helped him into his pack. "Why?"

"I saw you looking at the Yagaran aleudrupe plants there," he said, pointing a long finger at the pink shoots. "You will see many such non-native plants in the jungle, I'm afraid—leavings of previous visitors to the Varonat jungle who were less than careful with their provisions."

"Provisions?" Tapper asked as he got his own pack on.

"Aleudrupe berries are considered a delicacy on many worlds," Falmal said. "Some of those who join our safaris insist on

bringing their own provisions. A few carelessly dropped seeds—” He gestured elaborately. “We can only trust that the jungle itself will deal with such intrusions. Come, we must depart.”

They didn’t spot any more slime remnants before they reached Falmal’s chosen camping spot, at least none that Karrde could identify as such. There were no more aleudrupe plants, either. Perhaps after that first time the careless visitors had been warned.

“So,” Tapper said, bringing two cups of steaming liquid over to where Karrde had propped himself tiredly against a tree beside their tents. “What do you think of our fellow travelers?”

Karrde looked over at the others, still struggling with the escorts’ help to pitch their own shelters. “From the level of complaining during this last hour, I’d say they’re exactly what they seem: bored, wealthy beings looking for excitement and somewhat annoyed they’re having to work for it.”

“Hardly your typical smuggler, in other words.”

Karrde shrugged. “Maybe these are semi-legit businessmen Gamgalon wants to make deals with.”

“There are a million places in the galaxy he could set up private meetings without this much trouble,” Tapper pointed out, sipping at his cup.

“True. Incidentally, did you notice that piece of metal stuck in the ground behind those aleudrupe plants at our first rest stop?”

“Yes,” Tapper nodded. “Looked to me like a transpond marker. Probably there either to mark the path or else to keep track of the Morodin migrations.”

“Perhaps,” Karrde said. “I can’t help thinking, though, that Falmal reacted rather strongly when I started toward it.”

“You think it’s something less innocuous?”

“Could be,” Karrde said. “Possibly part of a sensor array to---”

He broke off. Through the trees, from somewhere nearby, came a deep, rumbling growl. Across the encampment, Falmal

straightened up as Buzzy and the Rodian unslung their blaster rifles. "This could be it," Karrde murmured, snagging his own weapon and levering himself to his feet. "Falmal?"

"Shh!" the Krish hissed. "You will frighten it. We will break into the same groups of three as in the airspeeders."

He hurried over to Karrde and Tapper as the others collected into their own groups and headed into the jungle. "Come. Quickly and quietly."

They headed out, blaster rifles at the ready. "How can the Morodins get through these trees?" Tapper asked. "I thought they were big."

"Morodins are long but slender," Falmal said, peering carefully through the trees. "They can move easily about the jungle. Ah—look!"

Karrde swung his blaster rifle around; but Falmal was only pointing at the ground. "Fresh slime trail," the Krish said. "You see?"

"Yes," Karrde said, eyeing the wide silvery line cutting across the ground cover and disappearing off into the trees. A remarkably straight line, too, veering only to get around an occasional tree.

"A large one, too," Falmal said. "Come. We will follow it."

"Doesn't seem very sporting," Tapper grunted as Falmal led the way through the trees.

"The trail will not last long," Falmal said over his shoulder. "It appears and disappears."

Karrde frowned off to his right. It was hard to tell through all the bushes, but—"Is that another slime trail over there?" he asked Falmal. "Paralleling ours about three meters away?"

"Yes, they usually move in pairs," the Krish said. "Quiet now. See, the trail is turning."

Ahead, the slime trail had turned sharply to the left. Karrde craned his neck; sure enough, the other trail was turning to remain parallel. "That's a pretty sharp angle," Tapper muttered. "You suppose something scared them?"

“Quiet,” Falmal said again.

In silence they continued on along the trail. It changed direction twice more in the next few minutes, turns as sharp and precise as the first had been. And then, to Karrde’s surprise, it split into two different directions. “How did it do that?” he asked.

“A third Morodin has joined,” Falmal said. “Quiet. It could be just ahead.”

“Maybe a third, fourth, and fifth,” Tapper said, nodding to the right. The paralleling slime trail there had split into three lines, two of them angling off three meters farther along the ground ahead of it. Swallowing, Karrde lifted his blaster rifle and took another step—

And suddenly, there it was: fifteen meters long, rearing the front of its rounded body three meters up off the ground, a mottled yellow creature with spoonbill snout, stubby legs, and wide teeth.

A Morodin.

“Shoot it!” Falmal yelled. “Quickly!”

Karrde’s rifle was already against his shoulder, the barrel tracking the huge creature in front of them. The Morodin reared another meter off the ground, giving out the same deep growl they’d heard back at the camp. Karrde squinted down the barrel ... “Wait a minute,” he told Tapper. “Hold your fire. It’s just standing there.”

“It is Morodin,” Falmal snarled. “Shoot before it’s too late.”

But it was already too late. From their right came a sudden sputtering volley of blaster fire, catching the Morodin solidly across its flank. Tamish and Cob-caree, with the Rodian behind them, had arrived along one of the lines of the other slime trail. The Morodin growled once more, then toppled to the ground with a thunderous crash.

“Well shot,” Falmal all but crowed. “We will summon the airspeeders, and the pilots will prepare your trophy. Let us return to camp now; the noise will have driven off the others.” He

looked speculatively at Karrde. "Perhaps tomorrow, Syndic Hart, will be your day for a kill."

"Perhaps," Karrde said, looking at the downed Morodin. So that was that. The big, dangerous Morodin safari ... and it had turned out to be no more challenging than shooting a bruallki in a net. "I can hardly wait."

The pilots arrived within an hour, and for nearly two hours afterward the encampment was busy as they shuttled slabs of Morodin meat in from the kill and held interminable conversations with Tamish and Cob-caree as to which would get which part of the head and their preferences in trophy mount and framing. Karrde stayed out of the activity, retreating back to his seat by the tree with a portable melodium and leaving Tapper to handle their share of the work. He overheard one or two rather finely honed comments about poor sportsmanship directed his way, but he ignored them. Leaning back against the tree, eyes half shut, he let the music from the melodium envelop him.

And, surreptitiously, fiddled with the settings of the comm-relay concealed inside the device.

The sun was dipping low over the forest by the time the pilots finished their work and the airspeeders took off back toward base camp. "I trust you've been enjoying yourself," Tapper commented, sitting down beside Karrde and wiping his face with the sleeve of his no longer sleek hunter's outfit. "Some of the others think you've been sulking."

"I can't help what they think," Karrde said. "Don't get comfortable; we're going for a walk."

"Wonderful," Tapper groaned, hauling himself back to his feet. "What's the drill?"

"I've been playing a little with the comm-relay," Karrde said, standing up and slinging the melodium's strap over his shoulder. "If Falmal and company have been planting transpond markers

in the vicinity, we should be able to pick them up with it. Nice and easy; let's not attract any attention."

They slipped out of camp and headed into the jungle. Karrde's hunch was right: almost immediately the rigged comm-relay found a signal, coming from the direction of the Morodin kill. Following the slime trail again, they soon reached what was left of the carcass, already busy with scavengers.

"There it is," Tapper said, pointing to a group of bushes a few meters away. "It's a transpond marker, all right. And right by one of the slime trails again."

"Yes," Karrde said, kneeling down for a closer look. The ground at the edge of the slime had been freshly turned, he saw. Almost as if something had been planted there ...

He looked up sharply, catching Tapper's eye. The other nodded: he'd heard the faint crunching noise, too. "Coming from the camp," he murmured.

The sound came again. "Let's take the long way," Karrde murmured back, pointing to the section of slime trail Tamish and Cob-caree had arrived along earlier. Explaining to Falmal or his cohorts why he was carrying a melodium on a walk through the jungle could get awkward. Especially if they found the gimmicked comm-relay inside it.

They heard the crunching sound once more as they left the site, but after that it seemed to fade behind them. Which was just as well. No more than fifteen meters into the jungle, the slime trail broke off; and when it reappeared three meters farther away, it had suddenly sprouted three more branches. "Uh-oh," Tapper muttered. "Which way?"

"I'm not sure," Karrde said, glancing behind them. The thought of a whole herd of Morodins prowling around was not an especially pleasant one. "Let's try this one," he said, pointing to the rightmost of the two trails. "We'll mark one of these trees first so we can backtrack if we have to."

Tapper was staring off into the jungle. "Let's try going a little farther in first," he suggested slowly. "We can always come back."

Karrde frowned at him. "Something?"

"A hunch," Tapper said. "Just a hunch."

Karrde pursed his lips. "How far in do you want to go?"

"About three hundred meters," Tapper said. "I remember a ridge in that direction on the map that overlooks a sort of wide depression in the ground."

Karrde grimaced. Three hundred meters in an unfamiliar jungle was nothing to be taken lightly. But on the other hand, Tapper's infrequent hunches were nearly always worth following up. "All right," he said. "But no farther than the ridge. And we head back sooner if our trail ends."

"Agreed. Let's go."

The slime trail split again a few meters along, and twice more made one of those short, three-meter breaks with new branches going off in different directions when it resumed. For a while Karrde tried to keep track of the number of lines, hoping to figure out how many animals they were dealing with here. But he soon gave up the effort. If the Morodins decided to get nasty, the difference between six and sixty of them would be largely academic.

"There's the ridge," Tapper said, pointing ahead at a last line of trees that seemed to open onto blue sky. "Let's take a look."

They stepped forward and between the trees. There, stretched out perhaps 100 meters below them, was the wide valley-like depression Tapper had described.

And gathered together at one side of it were upwards of fifty Morodins.

"We've found the crowd, all right," Karrde muttered uneasily. The slope down from their ridge into the valley was mildly steep, but he doubted it would bother something with the size and musculature of a Morodin. In fact he knew it wouldn't; the slime



trail they were following rounded the ridge and continued down without a break.

“Don’t look at the Morodins,” Tapper said. “Look at the slime trails.”

“What about them?”

“Look at them,” Tapper urged. “Tell me you see it, too.”

Karrde frowned, wondering what he was getting at. The whole depression was full of the lines, that was for sure, clearly visible between the trees and over the trampled bushes. Lots of lines, showing the same bends and branches as the ones they’d encountered up here ...

And then, abruptly, he got it. “I don’t believe it,” he breathed.

“I didn’t either,” Tapper said. “Look—one of them’s trying it.”

One of the Morodins had detached himself from the group and into the three-meter channel between two of the trails. Waddling quickly on those short legs, it moved to the first bend and turned to the left.

Into the first section of the elaborately constructed maze.

“Let’s get back,” Karrde said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I have a feeling we don’t want Gamgalon’s people finding us here.”

“Too late,” a soft voice said.

Carefully, Karrde looked over his shoulder. Two meters behind him stood Falmal and two of the Krish pilots, all three with blaster rifles at the ready. Behind them stood a fourth Krish, gazing thoughtfully at him. “Indeed,” Karrde said, lowering the muzzle of his own rifle and turning around to face them. “Well. At least we shouldn’t have any trouble finding the way back to camp.”

“Whether we return to camp directly has yet to be decided,” the fourth Krish said in that same soft voice. “Put your weapons down, please. And tell me what you are doing here.”

“We were looking for Morodins,” Karrde said as he and Tapper lowered their blaster rifles to the ground. “In the process

we stumbled on the fact that they're more than just simple animals." He cocked an eyebrow. "They're fully sentient beings, aren't they, Gamgalon?"

The Krish smiled. "Very good," he said. "On both counts. You know my name; what is yours?"

Under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be much point in continuing the masquerade. "Talon Karrde," Karrde identified himself. "This is my associate, Quelev Tapper."

Falmal hissed. "Was it not as I said, my liege?" he snarled. "Smugglers. And spies."

"So it would appear," Gamgalon said. "Why are you here, Talon Karrde?"

"Curiosity," Karrde said. "I've heard stories about these safaris of yours. I wanted to find out what was going on."

"And have you?"

"You're hunting sentient beings," Karrde said. "In violation of Imperial law. Even in these days, I imagine what's left of the Empire would deal rather harshly with you if they knew that."

Gamgalon smiled again. "You imagine wrongly. As it happens, the Imperial governor in charge of Varonat is fully aware of what is happening here. His portion of the earnings are quite adequate to insure that there are no such questions about the hunts."

Karrde frowned. "Surely you're not bribing an Imperial governor with scraps from safari tickets."

"Indeed not," Gamgalon said. "But as the safaris provide ideal cover for our planting and harvesting operations, it is in his best interests to allow them to continue."

"You're not bribing him with aleudrupe berries, either," Tapper put in. "You can buy those things on the open market for thirty or forty a packload."

"Ah—but not *these* aleudrupe berries," Gamgalon said smugly. "This particular crop is grown in soil saturated with Morodin slime ... and during their growth, these berries undergo an extremely interesting chemical change."

"Such as?"

Falmal hissed again. “My liege—?”

“Do not worry,” Gamgalon soothed him. “Consider, Talon Karrde, a merchant ship carrying three cargoes to a politically tense world: rethan-K, promhassic triaxli, and aleudrupe berries. All harmless, all legal, none worth so much as a raised voice from either Imperial customs or officials of the New Republic. The ship is sent on its way to the surface, where it is greeted enthusiastically by its customers.

“Who, a scant hour later, will be launching an attack on their political or military enemies. With weapons utilizing a blaster formulation fully as powerful as spin-sealed Tibanna gas.”

Karrde stared at him, a hard lump forming in his stomach. “The berries are a catalyst?”

“Excellent,” Gamgalon said approvingly. “Falmal was right—you are indeed clever enough to be dangerous. To be precise, it is the pits of the berries that create this new gas from the rethan and promhassic. The fruit itself is perfectly normal, and can stand up to any chemical test”

“And the safaris mask both the planting and the harvesting,” Karrde nodded. “With the transpond markers there to help you find the crops again after you’ve planted them. All the profits of weapons smuggling, with none of the risks.”

“You understand,” Gamgalon beamed. “And thus you must also understand why we can’t allow any hint of this to leak out.”

He gestured, and one of the Krish pilots stepped forward, bending awkwardly down to pick up the blaster rifles Karrde and Tapper had dropped. “Certainly I understand,” Karrde said. “Perhaps we could discuss an arrangement? My organization—”

“There will be no discussion,” Gamgalon said. “And my arrangements are my own. This way, please.” The pilot straightened up, gestured to the side with Karrde’s rifle—

And suddenly Tapper’s hands snapped out, plucking the rifle from the pilot’s hands and jabbing the muzzle hard into the Krish’s torso. Diving into the cover of the nearest tree, he swung the rifle back toward Falmal and Gamgalon—

And dropped spinning to the ground as a pair of blaster bolts slashed through him from down the ridge to his right. A single shuddering gasp, and he lay still.

"I trust, Talon Karrde," Gamgalon said into the brittle silence, "that you will not be so foolish as to similarly resist."

Karrde lifted his eyes from Tapper's crumpled figure, to see the third Krish pilot step out of concealment along the ridge, his rifle steady on Karrde's chest. "Why shouldn't I?" he demanded, his voice sounding ugly in his ears. "You're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?"

"Do you choose to die here?" Gamgalon countered. "This way, please."

Karrde took a deep breath. Tapper dead; Karrde himself unarmed and alone. Completely alone—even the Morodins down below had vanished, apparently scattering at the sound of the blaster fire.

But, no, he didn't wish to die here. Not when there was any chance at all that he could live long enough to avenge Tapper's death. "All right," he sighed. Two of the pilots stepped forward and took his arms, and together they all set off.

Karrde hadn't expected them to take him back to the encampment, and they didn't. From the direction Falmal was leading them, it looked like they were heading toward one of the other clearings they'd passed just before setting up camp. Undoubtedly where Gamgalon's airspeeder was waiting. "What sort of distribution setup do you have?" he asked.

"I have no need of assistance," Gamgalon said, looking back over his shoulder. "As I have said already."

"My organization could still be useful to you," Karrde pointed out. "We have contact people all over the—"

"You will be silent," Gamgalon cut him off.

"Gamgalon, listen—"

And from behind him came a deep, rumbling growl. A growl that was echoed an instant later from both sides.

The group came to a sudden halt. “Falmal?” Gamgalon snapped. “What is this? Why are there Morodins here?”

“I do not know,” Falmal said, an uneasiness in his voice. “This is not at all like them.”

The growls came again, from what seemed to be the same positions. “Maybe they’ve finally gotten tired of being the prey,” Karrde said, looking around. “Maybe they’ve decided to hold a safari of their own.”

“Nonsense,” Falmal bit out. But he was looking around, too. And he was starting to tremble. “My liege, I suggest we move on. Quickly.”

The roars came again. “Falmal take the prisoner,” Gamgalon ordered, his voice suddenly grim as he pulled a blaster from beneath his tunic. “You others: to the sides and rear. Shoot anything you see.”

Warily, the three pilots spread out into the jungle, blaster rifles held high. Falmal stepped to Karrde’s side, closed a tense hand around his arm. “Quickly,” he hissed.

Gamgalon stepped to Karrde’s other side, and together the three of them hurried forward. Ahead, through the trees, Karrde could see the glinting of sunlight from an airspeeder. Another chorus of Morodin roars came, all from behind them this time. They reached the last line of trees, stepping into the clearing—

And with a gasping sigh Falmal suddenly released Karrde’s arm and stumbled to sprawl on the ground, a knife hilt protruding from his side. Gamgalon snarled and spun around, his blaster searching for a target.

He never made it. Even as Karrde reflexively ducked to the side, the Krish’s tunic erupted in a brief burst of flame as a quiet blaster shot caught him neatly in the center of his torso. He fell backward to the ground and lay still.

Karrde turned; but it was not one of his fellow hunters whom he saw emerging from the cover of the tree they’d just passed. “Don’t just stand there,” Celina Marniss growled, lowering the tiny blaster in her hand as she passed him and headed toward the

airspeeder. “My air-speeder’s too far away—we’ll take theirs. Unless you want to be here when those other Krish catch up.”

“Nicely done,” Karrde commented as the *Uwana Buyer* cut through Varonat’s upper atmosphere toward deep space. “Nicely done indeed. Though I must confess a certain disappointment that it wasn’t actually the Morodins finally taking their vengeance.”

Beside him, Celina snorted under her breath. “Considering that they probably can’t tell a Human from a Krish, let alone one Human from another, you should count yourself lucky it wasn’t them. They’d have ground you into the dirt along with Gamgalon and his crew.”

“Most likely,” Karrde conceded. “Where did you get the recordings of Morodin growls?”

“Gamgalon took me along on one of his safaris once,” Celina said. “Back when he still thought he might have a chance of recruiting me into his organization.”

“So you weren’t working for him. We’d wondered about that.”

“I don’t like Krish,” she said flatly. “Even honest ones can’t be trusted very far, and Gamgalon hardly qualifies as honest. Besides, all he wanted me to do was play spaceport spy for him. Not much future in that.”

“Not anymore,” Karrde agreed. “So as long as you were out in the jungle anyway, you went ahead and recorded some Morodin growls?”

She shrugged. “I thought it might be handy to have something like that on file. Turns out I was right.” She threw him a look. “You owe me for those three recorders, by the way. Those things don’t come cheap.”

“I owe you for considerably more than that,” Karrde reminded her soberly. “Why did you follow us out there, anyway?”

“Oh, come now,” she scoffed. “Hart and Seoul? Not to mention a ship called the *Unana Buyer*? It was all just a little too cute; and I remembered hearing about a smuggler chief who had a fondness for cute wordplay. So I took a chance.”

“And it paid off,” Karrde said. “You’ve earned a considerable reward. Just name it.”

She turned to look at him with those green eyes of hers. “I want a job,” she said.

Karrde frowned. It hadn’t been the response he’d expected. “What kind of job?”

“Any kind,” she said. “I can pilot, fight, play come-up flector—”

“Hyperdrive mechanic?”

“That, too,” Celina said. “Anything you’ve got, I can learn it.” She took a deep breath, let it out. “I just want to get back into mainstream society again.”

Karrde cocked an eyebrow. “You have a strange view of smuggling if you consider it mainstream society.”

“Trust me,” she said grimly. “Compared with some of what I’ve done, it is.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Karrde said, studying her face. A very striking face, with a striking body to go with it. Decorative and competent both; his favorite combination. “All right,” he said. “You’ve got yourself a deal. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you,” she said. “You won’t regret hiring me.”

“I’m sure I won’t.” He smiled slightly. “And since we’re now officially working together—” he held out his hand. “You can call me Talon Karrde.”

She smiled tightly as she took his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Talon Karrde,” she said. “You can call me Mara Jade.”

# **Tinian on Trial**

## **by Kathy Tyers**

Tinian P'att, the granddaughter and heiress of P'att Armament's founders, wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe too deeply. The factory complex's demonstration room smelled like scorched meat and chemicals. She could identify five ... no, seven formulas by their odors, a potentially catastrophic witch's brew. Occasionally, the demonstration explosives detonated harder, faster, or earlier than anyone anticipated, and even quadruple transparisteel didn't provide full protection.

Standing beside Grandfather Strephan, Daye Azur-Jamin rested his hand on a waist-high blast barricade. Daye's P'att Armament gray tunic accentuated his air of authority. So did the management comlink he wore on his belt. A prematurely gray streak marked the center of Daye's left eyebrow. "There's nothing patently wrong with stormtrooper armor, your excellency," he said, and Tinian admired his self-control. She knew how Daye felt about Grandfather's Imperial connections. "But a good marksman—or an idiot with a high-powered



blaster—can pick out weak spots. Our field makes it invulnerable.”

Imperial Moff Eisen Kerioth slapped a polished ebony swagger stick into one palm. Tall and lean, Moff Kerioth held his head thrust forward over an astonishing array of red and blue rank squares. Tinian, Daye, and her grandparents had expected tech advisors for this demonstration, and maybe a few army troopers, but never a Sector Moff with stormtrooper escort. Kerioth limped, favoring a stiff left leg and occasionally leaning on the swagger stick. “Sounds wonderful, boy. So why did your demonstration employee turn coward?”

Grandfather Strephan’s old black Imperial service uniform set off his thick white hair. Grandmother Augusta fiddled with a side hem of her long green robe. She’d recently developed a rare degenerative syndrome, and Druckenwell’s top bioimmunal specialist gave her only months to live unless she sought treatment. It wasn’t available here in II Avali, or at any other city on Druckenwell ... and it was expensive. Behind Grandmother Augusta, the P’att family’s Wookiee bodyguard Wrrlevgebev lounged against a pebbly gray duracrete wall. Wrrl rumbled a quick comment under his breath that only Tinian—who’d studied his language—could translate.

She didn’t, but she shared Wrrl’s disdain for cowardly employees. She fiddled with a collection of paraphernalia in her jumpsuit pocket: neka nut shells, droid adjustment tools, and her secret good-luck piece.

She would need all her good luck today. If P’att Armamerit sold its new armor-protective field, then her grandparents could retire, and she and Daye would take over the factory.

Kerioth straightened his shoulders and neck, then poked Grandfather with his swagger stick. “Well, P’att? Who’s going to get into that armor? We came a long way to see this.” Evidently Grandfather had known the Moff years ago. Each man had chosen his own way to serve the New Order: Grandfather by

protecting Imperial might, Kerieth by wielding it. Kerieth crooked a finger at Wrrl. "You. Wookiee. Come down here."

Wrrl curled back his lips from huge teeth and let out a punctuated howl. Kerieth had demanded that the Patts disarm their Wookiee during his visitation, and Wrrl was already irritated. A red-blond stripe crossed Wrrl's face, fur almost the same shade as Tinian's shoulder-length hair. It was odd coloration for a Wookiee.

"What did he say, Tinian?" Grandfather's business acumen showed in the way he measured and accommodated the Moff. By comparison, Kerieth seemed ...

Tinian tried to emulate her observant grandfather. Kerieth seemed blunt. And condescending.

She glanced at the shell pieces on the arming table. Eighteen white units lay beside the limp halves of a two-piece black body glove. Wrrl wouldn't fit inside the body glove, let alone the field. "Your excellency, he's too big," she translated. "The field nodes maximize at one point eight six meters of height and one meter of width."

Moff Kerieth lifted a narrow black eyebrow. "Patt, tell me again why your grandchild attends classified demonstrations."

Tinian bristled. She might be small and thin, but she was no child. Hadn't Kerieth noticed her company jumpsuit?

Grandfather laid a warm hand on her arm. "Your excellency, Tinian is an invaluable team member. She has amazing instincts for explosives."

One stormtrooper stood at the center of the second seating row up. "Sir," he said through his helmet filter, "if the Wookiee's too tall, what about her?"

Tinian blanched. Her ... demonstrate? Stand in the wave trap and get shot at?

"From one extreme to the other," quipped Kerieth. "Invaluable team member, is she?"

Grandfather backed toward a code panel. From this wall, he could lower two quadruple-transparisteel blast walls between the

wave trap and the four broad rows of retractable shielded seating. “Ah ... yes, but Tinian is not our demonstration volunteer.”

Kerioth shifted his weight. “She would fit. Are you totally confident that your armor is impervious to blaster fire?”

“Totally,” murmured Grandfather.

“Then prove it.”

“But ... no. I shall call for a line droid.”

“I perceive a certain lack of confidence.” Moff Kerioth directed the taunt at his storm troopers, but Tinian took it in the gut. Grandfather and Grandmother must reach that offworld health care facility. Love focused Tinian’s courage, and so did her hopes. The field worked. She’d seen it tested.

“Grandfather?” She raised a hand. “I’ll volunteer.”

Grandfather, Grandmother, and Daye stepped forward, speaking simultaneously: “Wait—” “Tinian—” “No—”

Wrll blinked huge blue eyes and suggested under his breath that Daye was built more like a stormtrooper than she was.

Tinian fixed Moff Kerioth with her stare. She was betting he’d act like a BlasTech Company bureaucrat she’d once met at a party—once he’d suggested something, no other idea would suit him.

Kerioth’s smile spread slowly from his thin lips to cold, dark eyes. “Very good, ah, Tinian. A true trial of P’att Armament’s excellence.”

Before Tinian could change her mind, she dragged Wrll to the arming table. “Help me,” she ordered him.

Her jumpsuit would easily fit inside the black body glove. She also selected the upper-body corselet, the carapace and the breastplate, which armorers dubbed the Body Bucket when worn together. She shoved them at Wrll. Rear-mounted on the carapace, in place of the usual instrument pack, P’att Armament droids had installed a heat dissipator and the field transmitter. A single new control stood out on the breastplate.

She slipped off her shoes and slid one leg into the body glove. She'd never heard so much silence. "Grandfather," she suggested, "explain how the body glove enhances the field."

"Tinian," Grandfather pleaded.

The glove's leggings sagged on her with wrinkles all down their length. She yanked her narrow jumpsuit belt out of its loops and secured the heavy black fabric. "I've memorized the speech," she insisted. "Should I deliver it?"

Moff Kerioth rested his swagger stick on one shoulder. "Please do," he purred.

Suddenly she disliked him. Daye had always insisted that he'd rather die in a noble cause than earn his living from an ignoble one, and she hoped this was only her nerves, whining out from the spot where she was stuffing them (to keep Daye from trying to stop her), that made Kerioth look suddenly sinister.

Daye was sensitive to an energy field he called the Force. He claimed that Force-sensitive was not a healthy way to be in Emperor Palpatine's New Order, and he'd cautioned Tinian and her grandparents that the Empire had stooped to violent repression in other parts of the galaxy ... but Tinian didn't believe it. I'att Armament had supplied the New Order for years, profiting handsomely.

She shrugged into the body glove's top. As she smoothed loose black fabric over the floppy mess at her waist, she drew a deep breath. "The protective field produces anti-energy bursts just out of phase with blaster fire," she began. "Zersium flecks that we've bonded into the advanced body glove—" Tinian pushed up one slack sleeve and ran the back of her hand over the other forearm "—amplify the field. We see that as a key element of this new system—"

"The entire system has too often proved vulnerable." Kerioth's voice rose. "Eight years ago, I had a storm-trooper escort shot to pieces around me. I've dragged this ever since." He whacked his left leg with the swagger stick. "Are you comfortable in there, child?"

*I'm not a child.* "I'm fine." She squared her shoulders. "I'm sorry about your leg. May I finish?"

He swung the swagger stick. "By all means."

"We have thus eliminated weak spots," she said, "long known to insurrectionist elements. I'm ready, Wrrl."

Her Wookiee lifted the breastplate and carapace. Grandmother Augusta folded trembling hands in front of her long green robe. Daye took up a position behind Tinian. If she hesitated or even flinched, she guessed he'd demand to wear the armor.

She hefted the carapace. "There is insulation and a heat dissipator built into this piece," she explained, raising the back protector so Moff Kerioth and his escorts could see inside it. A black sleeve flopped down to cover her other palm. She pushed it up, bunching fabric back toward her elbow. "For the microsecond it takes for the field to reach full efficiency, the armor itself handles heat absorption. Insulation, plus this dissipator, almost eliminate thermal discomfort."

"Allegedly." Kerioth sounded sarcastic.

Tinian decided that she'd never please him except by demonstrating the product. Then he'd be impressed. Then he'd grant P'att Armament the most lucrative contract it'd ever earned. Thousands of stormtroopers would need this coverage. "Help me, Wrrl."

Wrrl fitted the corselet to Tinian's back and front, clamping it together at her shoulders. Tinian trusted Wrrl completely. Five years ago, she'd spotted him being beaten by a slave dealer. Bloody bunches of fur had littered the ground around the huge alien. Tinian—barely twelve—had dashed forward, disregarding Grandmother Augusta's protests (she could always move faster than either grandparent). She'd saved the creature's life. Little had she known that in rescuing Wrrl, she'd bought loyalty-to-the-death.

The shell pieces hung out over her shoulders. Tinian wriggled until they balanced.

Daye picked up the shoulder pauldrons, clasping them between long, sensitive hands. "Put these on, too," he murmured. The gray streak arched higher than the rest of either of his eyebrows. According to Druckenwell's strict population laws, she and Daye were too young to marry until they proved financial independence. Slender and bookish-looking with lively brown eyes, Daye had come to II Avali to make a life for himself.

He was now officially Tinian's Second Undersupervisor and the very center of her life. She let him attach the pauldrons over her shoulders. They dangled to cover her elbows, enclosing her upper body with a loose, ill-fitting box. Field conduits clacked against each other when she turned toward Daye. If only she could reassure him—

"I know why you're doing this." He leaned close and stared down at her. "I don't like it, but I understand. No one ever calls you a coward and gets away with it." He squeezed her forearm. "Force be with you, love."

As he backed away, Tinian rotated a control on the breastplate. The first time she'd seen this field demonstrated, she'd worried at this point. The field didn't hum, buzz, sparkle, or even glimmer.

"Grandfather?"

As if awakening from the dead, he raised a small luma. Tinian held out her arm to one side. He switched on the luma. No bright spot appeared on her sleeve.

"As energy encounters the anti-energy field," Grandfather said, regaining his voice, "the field responds and cancels it. We're now certain the field is operating."

"Ready, Tinian?" the Moff asked. His voice was as bland as if he were inviting her to sit down for lunch instead of ordering her out in front of a firing squad.

Tinian stalked to the wave trap, feeling ridiculous inside the enormous bucket, pauldrons, and body glove. Built like a pocket at one end of the spacious demonstration room, the wave trap's baffled duracrete walls and floor angled together to absorb

unthinkable bursts of energy. Tiny shadowed pits in its walls gave evidence of past demonstrations.

At least she couldn't smell the room anymore. Even without a helmet, the odor had stopped registering several minutes ago.

Daye stood close to the barricade, frowning. She drew up tall—for her height—and barely smiled across at him. Wrrl edged toward the code panel.

Kerioth swept his swagger stick toward three storm-troopers. "You three. Rifles," he snapped. They marched forward. Daye held both hands down at his sides. Usually, he kept one or both casually tucked in a pocket.

Tinian stared at the blast rifles. Those weren't the shiny new factory items she generally dealt with.

Daye glared at the nearest stormtrooper.

"Ready," snapped the Moff. Three rifles lifted. "Aim for weak spots."

Kerioth turned to eye Tinian. His lip curled. Evidently he enjoyed watching the P'att contingent sweat.

She knew that the armor worked. But staring down three rifle shafts, she momentarily lost control of her panic.

Instantly, Daye's face reflected her fear. He spun toward the trooper and tentatively reached for his rifle. "Now," Kerioth ordered.

Three vermilion energy beams whizzed at Tinian's chest. She flinched, but she couldn't dodge quickly enough. Heat flashed over her back and shoulders despite the bucket's extra insulation. Daye froze and stared, stricken.

"Cease fire." Kerioth twirled his swagger stick.

Tinian straightened back up, let out her breath, then smiled weakly at Daye. The sale was as good as made. She'd done it, though she wished she hadn't tried to duck.

Daye thrust a hand into his pocket and frowned. Her momentary panic had probably jabbed him deeper than it'd frightened her.

Kerioth slipped a comlink out of his belt sheath. "Squads three, four, and five: seal entrances. No traffic or communication off grounds."

"Excuse me?" Grandfather stepped forward, obviously as confused as Tinian abruptly felt. "Sir, what is the meaning of this?"

Moff Kerioth tapped Grandfather's shoulder with his swagger stick. "Congratulations, P'att. I am buying your product."

"You sealed our entrances."

Kerioth clasped his hands at the small of his back. "It would be unfortunate if insurrectionist elements learned that we'd found a way to make stormtrooper armor invincible, would it not?"

*We* found a way? Tinian silently protested.

Grandmother Augusta glided forward, rustling her robes. "Our security has always been unparalleled, Moff Kerioth. You need have no fear concerning our—"

"*Naturally*, then," continued Moff Kerioth, "you understand that everyone who has worked above certain levels on this project must return with me to the Doldur system. This item must be manufactured under strictly regulated conditions. The New Order controls Doldur right down to food prices. It is the safest world for advanced military manufacturing."

*It's your turf*, Tinian realized. *You want this manufactured where you can watch.*

Grandfather's eyes narrowed. "I am sorry, but this family cannot travel. Augusta needs medical care."

Tinian fingered the black body glove's sleeve selvage. "After all these years of hard work, they deserve peaceful retirement," she protested. "Daye and I are prepared to run the plant. We'll..." She hesitated, then plunged on. It was the only way. "We'll go to Doldur with you. But Grandfather and Grandmother are retiring to Geridard."

"No," said Kerioth. "You will return to Doldur with me. All of you."



"Sir," Augusta spoke up, "I apologize for making things difficult, but our application for the Geridard Convalescent Center has already been processed. We've advanced them 90,000 credits for life care."

Kerioth turned away. He tilted his chin as if rereading the Patts' requests off the ceiling. When he pivoted back around, his condescending smile had returned. "You will not travel to Doldur? I cannot convince you?"

"Unfortunately, sir, it's impossible." Strephan folded his arms over his black uniform's decorated breast.

"Perhaps not so unfortunate. That enables me to dispose of your retirement and health worries simultaneously." Kerioth swung his swagger stick at the nearest stormtrooper. "Take them both."

Before Tinian understood, the stormtrooper whipped up his blast rifle and fired twice. Grandfather Strephan tumbled to the duracrete. Augusta gasped before she collapsed over Strephan.

They didn't move again. Too shocked to protest, Tinian covered her mouth with both hands. Daye bent his knees, ready to lunge. "Why did you do that?" he whispered.

Kerioth angled his swagger stick like a weapon at Daye's chest. "I'll let you youngsters in on a secret," he announced. "I have been sponsoring research into this type of anti-blaster energy field on Doldur. Emperor Palpatine will be most grateful when I present this invention as my own ... with all the uncooperatives out of the way.

"You do wish to cooperate?" he asked blandly.

*Grandfather! Grandmother!* Stunned by her grief and horror, Tinian had to survive ... to avenge them. She nodded. *Say yes!* she mentally begged Daye.

He straightened slowly, but he didn't speak.

Kerioth shrugged. "Binders for the boy," he ordered another trooper. "How long and how comfortably you live, boy, will depend on how well you *cooperate*." He stressed the word again.

Daye adjusted his stance, turning both feet out slightly. One trooper reached into a utility-belt compartment. Tinian glanced from the trooper to Daye. Daye eyed the trooper. Daye had learned some self-defense from Wrrl. He could move faster than anyone expected.

She must create a distraction.

“Wrrl!” she cried. “Help!” She spun around and dashed for the door.

Wrrl’s roar frightened even Tinian. He slammed the code panel with one gigantic paw. A transparisteel blast wall plunged out of the ceiling, trapping Kerioth and two stormtroopers on the inside.

But four troopers remained. Wrrl rushed the pair blocking the exit, lifted each by a shoulder, and bashed their helmets together.

Tinian sprang through.

“Go left!” Daye shouted behind her. “Wrrl, stay with Tinian!”

Tinian whirled left and tried to run. One of her loose leggings tripped her. Blaster fire whizzed over her head. Wrrl tried to scoop her up with long shaggy arms. Fur shriveled where he touched her.

“Don’t!” she cried. The field unpredictably damaged living flesh that touched it. Tinian scrambled to her feet. Wrrl sprinted past a bewildered-looking service droid. She caught a whiff of burned fur. “Daye?” she cried. “Wrrl, where’s—”

Wrrl shrieked something about separating the storm-troopers.

They reached the lift tube. Tinian jumped onto its floor grid. It didn’t activate to carry her upward. “They’ve shut it off!” she cried.

Wrrl stepped in front of her, clearly inviting her to climb onto his back.

There was no other way out of this bottleneck. Tinian switched off the armor field, vaulted up, and clenched her hands in front of Wrrl’s throat, hoping nobody shot at them. Singed, matted fur brushed her face. The stormtrooper-sized breastplate dug into her stomach.

Wrrl leaped up the shaft wall, catching enormous claws—she hadn’t even known that he had claws!—in its duracrete sides. Powerful muscles rippled under Tinian’s hold. She clenched her knees around his sides, trying to keep her weight from choking him.

He dragged his weight and hers up to the main floor. A security droid rolled toward them, four claw-mounted blasters and scanners installed atop a perfectly balanced sphere. It endlessly repeated, “Halt! Drop all weapons! Halt—”

Tinian gulped a deep breath. “Recognition,” she shouted over Wrrl’s shoulder. Her voice ought to shut it off ...

“Confirmed.” The droid spun in place. It retreated, still broadcasting.

Daylight shone through the southeastern service door. Another pair of stormtroopers crouched beside it, obviously alerted over Kerioth’s comlink. “Freeze,” ordered one.

Tinian slid off Wrrl’s back and slapped the field control back on. Then she dashed at them, too full of adrenaline to cower or even flinch this time.

While the troopers fired at Tinian, Wrrl sped past her on long, shaggy limbs. He reached them before she did and bodily flung them aside.

She’d never seen a Wookiee’s full strength before. He terrified her.

Outside the service door, two energy-fenced conveyors connected the entry with P’att Armament’s main receiving area. Wrrl howled encouragement at her.

Tinian leaped onto one conveyor and dashed toward the open spaces and freedom. Fabric flapped around her feet, dangling but giving her feet some protection. She grabbed a fistful of loose fabric above each knee and pulled up. That helped a little, but she couldn’t bend her elbows far enough to do any real good.

She jumped off the conveyor onto gray duracrete. A three-meter wall surrounded the complex, surmounted by a catwalk with heavy gun emplacements. When Tinian glanced up, her

heart sank. Five stormtroopers dashed along the top of the wall, three from the north and two from the west, converging on the corner ahead of her and Wrrl.

Then she remembered her good-luck piece. “Wait!” she cried. She dug down through layers of clothing and extricated a small hunk of chepatite impact explosive. She’d picked it up the first day Grandfather (her mind spasmed in pure, illogical grief: *Grandfather!*) had let her work a full shift. A silly souvenir and dangerous, maybe, but she couldn’t fling it hard enough to set it off.

Wrrl could. “Take this,” she exclaimed. “Throw it—there.” She pointed at the big corner gun. Two troopers aligned its sights on her and the Wookiee. “Then duck.”

Wrrl bared his teeth, seized the explosive, and hurled it. Sweat trickled down Tinian’s chest. She was roasting—

Dust, grit, and duracrete boulders blasted in all directions. A gap appeared beneath where the gun had been. Tinian sprinted toward it. Her shoulders and back flashed hot again. More troopers must have rushed in behind her.

The rubble pile was almost two meters high. Wrrl urged her to hurry.

Tinian yanked the bunched fabric and scrabbled upward. “How bad—are—you hurt?” she gasped.

He growled defiance.

“Wrrl—you need—a medic—”

He tossed his head and kept running.

Tinian scrambled over the top. A laser blast whizzed off her right pauldron. That blast came from outside the wall! She flung herself backward into Wrrl’s arms.

Wrrl yipped surprise. Had she singed him again?

He shoved her aside, grabbed a duracrete boulder, and heaved it down at the outside trooper. Then he woofed gently at Tinian, urging her out.

A blast from behind struck him. He howled.

“Are you all right?” Tinian cried.

He gurgled and pointed outside the wall.

“Not without you!”

Disregarding the armor field, he cuffed her with a huge paw. Tinian jumped down the rubble pile, spun around, and glanced up.

Wrll stood framed by the gap. Another bolt caught him in his side. He screamed and turned full around, then lurched toward the stormtroopers inside the enormous guard wall.

Grief-stricken and stumbling with every other step, Tinian dashed across a weedy field that surrounded P’att Armament. This was a secure area, maintained in case of internal disaster ... and to enable guard wall staff to watch incoming traffic.

Why weren’t they chasing her? Had Wrll stopped all of them?

Wearing heat dissipation armor, she’d shine like a beacon to IR sensors. It would be easy to tag her with heavy weaponry. Moff Kerioth was probably calling over to II Avali Spaceport right now.

How could she have been so wrong about the Empire? When had it changed?

At the weed field’s edge, dilapidated duracrete buildings formed a toothy perimeter. Tinian slapped off the field projector and stumbled toward an abandoned warehouse. Its door hung askew. Two maybe-Human derelicts scrambled deeper into shadows inside.

Tinian tried to imagine what they’d seen: the top half of an armless, unhelmeted stormtrooper? She pushed away from that warehouse and ran two more turns around bends in the alleys, but didn’t find any better cover.

She shoved the flapping armor pieces up over her head, then shed the black glove like an old reptile skin. She was about to abandon it when a thought bigger than fear struck her: Moff Kerioth wanted this protection field badly enough to kill for it. She must use it to hurt Eisen Kerioth.

She dug her utility vibro-knife out of another jumpsuit pocket. Painstakingly she sliced vital components off the breastplate—

three electronic c-boards, controls, conduits—then the carapace—insulation, plus the projector itself.

Overhead movement snagged her peripheral vision. A silent repulsorcraft sped over the warehouse row.

Tinian shrank into the nearest building's shadow. She stuffed everything small into her pocket along with her vibro-knife. Then she bundled the rest of the vital parts together. Dashing barefoot around the next corner, she stepped on something sharp and almost fell into a rubbish heap ready for droid pickup.

That gave her another idea. Limping, she hurried back to the debris she'd left. She scooped shell fragments into the body glove and flung them behind the rubbish, safer from detection. Then she limped deeper into II Avali's bad quarter.

Happy's Landing must be nearby. She and Daye had visited the ale house several times, thinly disguised in working-class coveralls, looking for good music and flamingly spicy food. Luck and adrenaline got her there after only one wrong turn. She paused in the doorway, then plunged into its dark interior without giving her eyes time to adjust. It sounded nearly vacant. Late afternoon had never been Happy's busy hour.

She tripped over a bench. Nobody protested, so it must be vacant. She sank down, exhausted and ashamed. She had to get off Druckenwell, the only world she'd ever known.

But how? And ... alone? Daye would meet her here, if he could.

She swallowed on a parched throat. Mustn't use her credit account. She dug into a third jumpsuit pocket and found a few credit tokens worth a cold glass of Elba water. She dropped them onto the table.

Then she pillowed her sweaty forehead on her arms and tried to think. She couldn't've gotten this far unless Kerioth had sent most of his troopers chasing Daye. Therefore, Daye must be a prisoner. (Her mind writhed again: *Daye! Wrrl, oh, Wrrl!*)

On second thought, she'd worn the invaluable armor. They'd've all chased her.

No, he'd codeveloped the anti-energy field. They needed Daye alive. Kerioth was undoubtedly tracking them both—

Daye Azur-Jamin flattened on the floor of a narrow service tunnel, scarcely breathing. During his first moments of flight, he'd been clipped by blaster fire halfway down his left thigh. It'd stopped throbbing several minutes ago. Now it simply felt dead.

Three pairs of white boots scurried past, outside the shaft's access panel.

They'd find him sooner or later.

Daye dragged himself past the panel, deeper toward the center of P'att Armament.

Using his tiny comlink, he'd monitored Eisen Kerioth's command frequency. Poor Wrrl had paid off his life debt in full, and enabled Tinian to elude pursuit, but Kerioth—who'd escaped his transparisteel cage by talking a trooper through code permutations—had ordered repulsorcraft. They'd catch Tinian quickly unless he could divert them.

Daye's comlink also let him follow stormtrooper teams as they hunted him. Kerioth had ordered all personnel off factory grounds—he meant to use IR scanning, and fewer warm footprints inside the factory would help.

It would be a race, then. P'att Armament's power grid lay under a force shield, open to the sky; the plant was built around it like a vast open square. In half an hour, Daye could crawl to the main power station. In two minutes more, he could backfeed the force shield into the power grid. That would take out the whole factory. Daye had hesitated to endanger innocent bystanders, but Kerioth was clearing bystanders away.

He probably wouldn't escape. But at least Eisen Kerioth wouldn't steal P'att Armament's anti-energy field—Daye and Strephan's own brainchild—and get away with it.

No one would ever know what Daye had done, either, except Tinian. She knew him too well.

The thought made him smile. He crawled on.

“Why, hello, Princess Tinian.”

Momentarily terrified, Tinian flung herself upright. She breathed again when she saw two familiar people standing over her. Happy’s Landing’s current torch singer, Twilit Hearth, wore a scandalous, shimmering sapphire-blue gown. Twilit’s mate, Sprig Cheever, sported a short, neat goatee and nondescript clothing. He set a glass of Elba water in front of her.

Tinian dashed tears away from her eyes and guzzled it.

Twilit touched her shoulder. “Hey. Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I—” Tinian gulped. She needed allies, and Daye—deft reader of strangers’ intentions—had liked these two. (*Where was he?*) “I’ve got to hide. I’m in big trouble.”

“Hey, it couldn’t be that ba—”

“Stormtroopers. They’ve shut down the factory.”

“No,” whispered Twilit. “Where’s ... you know, your prince?”

“I don’t know,” Tinian groaned.

Twilit seized Tinian’s elbow. “Come with me. There’s no time to lose.”

Twilit pulled her through a dark, cluttered hallway behind the kitchen, then up one flight of stairs to a cramped little dressing-sleeping room.

“Twilit, thanks,” Tinian objected, “but they’ll search up here.” She laid her valuables under an old boot rack, then startled. She’d sliced three c-boards off the control panel. Now she had only two.

“We’ll hide you in plain sight.” Twilit grabbed a shimmering red gown. “But we’ve got to move fast. Put this on.”

She’d dropped one c-board! *Concentrate, Tinian. First you’ve got to survive.* Tinian eyed Twilit’s curves, then glanced down her size-one jumpsuit. “Twilit, it won’t—”

“You’ve only got minutes,” said the singer. “Are you going to walk into their gun sights wearing that uniform?”



Tinian skinned out of her jumpsuit and yanked up the extravagant gown. To her shock, padding slid into position over all the right places. The singer was no more voluptuous than Tinian, not in the flesh. She glanced into the room's only mirror. Her face and someone else's body looked out.

"Not bad," said the singer, "but we can do better." She spun a pair of shoes across the floor toward Tinian and rummaged in a tattered duffel. "I assume you can sing."

"Not like you." Tinian gratefully pulled on one shoe. Too big, but it would protect her throbbing foot.

"Most Imperials wouldn't know a song sparrow from a cloud crupa. You know all my songs, I've watched your lips move." Twilit opened ajar and smeared something onto Tinian's face. Tinian submitted to several layers of paint and a rapid, hair-pulling fluff job before Twilit announced, "Break's over, Princess. Get down there and show your stuff."

Tinian eyed the mirror again. Only the stranger looked out at her now. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. The stranger's lips moved when she spoke.

Twilit's face appeared beside the stranger's. Fire blazed in Twilit's blue eyes—the same shade as her own, Tinian realized. "The Empire and I had a disagreement four or five systems ago," Twilit answered. "Now get down there."

"But you—"

"I'm deathly ill. Couldn't sing another note for at least an hour. Go. Cheeve and Yccakic'll help."

Tinian tottered down the steps. Now that her eyes had adjusted, she could make out the ale house's interior. Two Human customers sat at one table, a lone Devaronian at the bar. On a clear, triangular stage raised above table level, Sprig Cheever crouched cracking his knuckles over the black, white, and green keys of a KeyBed that almost enclosed him. The other sentient band member, a Bith named Yccakic, plucked his Bottom Viol's five strings as he adjusted buttons along its tall

upright neck. Redd Metalflake, the group's self-contained droid sound system, sat behind them audibly tweaking his circuitry.

"I'm ... singing?" Tinian croaked. "Twilit feels poorly."

Cheever grinned down through the stage at her. "That'll work."

Tinian climbed up to stand beside him. He played two chords she recognized, and she launched into "All I Can Ever Do" with all the guts she could muster. Now that she'd slowed down, she could only think of Daye. How could she sing, with Daye in terrible danger ... if he was alive?

Without warning, two stormtroopers sprang through Happy's front door. Tinian gulped. She covered the beat she'd missed by ad-libbing a lyric. One trooper glanced at her. Immediately he swiveled away. She felt relieved ... and hurt, too. Was she that unattractive in real life?

The troopers hustled from table to table. Just as they vanished into the kitchens, a seismic rumble rocked the ale house. Patrons slid under tables. Tinian flailed, trying to grab something, and connected with Yccakic's arm. "Off the stage!" Cheever commanded. Yccakic laid down his Viol and towed her down clear, narrow stairs, then out into the dusk-darkening street.

Three gargantuan fireballs lit the northern sky, rising under low clouds precisely where P'att Armament had stood.

Both stormtroopers dashed out of Happy's Landing. Passing without a backward glance, they sprinted up the street. A customer who'd followed Yccakic outdoors saluted the fireballs with a raised fist. "Down the rich!" he hooted. "Down the Empire! Up anarchy!"

"Hey," burred Yccakic. "You okay, kid?"

Tinian's ears sang. Her vision blacked out from the edges inward.

She collapsed in a heap.

A beefy stranger stumbled into Happy's Landing near dawn. Tinian, still masquerading as Twilit, drooped on a bench close to Cheever. The stranger demanded a TrooperBreath, downed the chartreuse glassful, then looked around for company. Spotting Tinian and Cheever, he wobbled over. "That oughta help. I've been hunting and lifting all night," he declared.

"What's up?" Cheever set a hand casually on Tinian's shoulder.

"I just spent four hours slaving for the Empire. The head trooper rounded up all the muscle he could find out on the streets."

"What for?"

"He had us searching P'att Armament ... or the crater that usedta be P'att Armament ... for survivors." The ale house spun around Tinian.

"Find any?" Cheever squeezed her shoulder.

The bulky newcomer shook his head. "The Big Moff's speeder was the smallest wreckage we could identify. Other than that, nothing. Totality. Looked like an inside job to me." He burped, then grinned toothily. "Some brave, suicidal lunatic musta wanted to take it away from the Empire pret-ty badly." He raised a glass in wordless tribute.

Tinian stared. Daye, gone? All that promise ... *broken?*

Not only Daye, but Grandfather, Grandmother, and Wrrl.

All her life.

She lost track of time after that. Some hours later, the band held council upstairs over the kitchens. "Time to leave Druckenwell." Cheever draped his long legs over a packing crate. "This place is too hot for me."

"Me, too," put in Twilit.

"We'll never get away," lamented a metallic monotone. Cheever had lugged Redd Metalflake upstairs and set the boxy sound droid on a stretch of floor. "Everyone picks on musicians."

Twilit folded her arms. “We’ll go,” she said firmly. “The last time we ignored Cheever, we nearly lost our instruments in an apartment fire. Is somebody onto us, Cheeve?”

“Not yet.”

Tinian barely listened. She was in shock. *Nothing will ever touch me again. Nothing. No one. Ever.*

Yccakic flicked a series of folds around his tiny mouth. “Has anyone looked up outside? We’ve got a blanket of repulsorcraft sitting over II Avali. Security will be double; at customs, triple. And we promised Tinian—”

“We’ll make it,” Cheever predicted.

Twilit cleared her throat. “Fix my ID for her. I’ll lie low here for a few days.”

Cheever raised an eyebrow.

Twilit shrugged. “If Comus can make my ID cover Tinian, he can run me a dupe, easy. I’ll be okay.”

Cheever stroked his short beard. “That’ll work. But Princess, about that ... luggage of yours. I don’t think we can risk taking it out through Imperial Customs.”

That cracked Tinian’s introspection. Even with a c-board missing, those pieces might help someone recreate the anti-energy field. “Wait,” she begged. “The customs people will have no idea what your instruments are supposed to look like ... right?”

Twilit shrugged. “They’re musical morons,” she agreed. “What are you driving at?”

“It’s already in pieces,” Tinian answered. “Attach them to your instruments.”

Cheever stroked his goatee. “Ye-es,” he drawled. “I can fit most of it to look like it’s part of the KeyBed’s insides.”

“I’m good for a c-board or two,” proclaimed Redd. A touch of reverb added confidence to his voice.

Tinian wondered if she were going crazy. She didn’t care if she lived or died, but she must get that field transmitter out through customs. “Couldn’t you get it off Druckenwell safer without me?”

If they catch me trying to pass Twilit's ID, it's the spice mines for all of us."

Affectionately, Twilit mussed Tinian's hair. "We know good people offworld," she said. "People who can use that stuff against the Empire. They'll want to talk to the P'att Princess. Guaranteed."

A door slammed. "She was there, all right," declared Woyiq.

Daye shuddered. The huge, beefy man's voice jabbed daggers through his injured head.

The other Human—or was he a Gotal? Daye's eyes wouldn't focus—turned to shush Woyiq. "Hey, keep it down!"

"Sorry." Woyiq slunk toward Daye's bedside. "Sorry." The huge Human had dragged Daye out from between jagged duracrete slabs, laboring in near-total darkness at the bottom of II Avali's deep new crater. "Really, I'm sorry—"

Daye squeezed his attendant's hand. "Did you—"

"Wait," said the ... yes, with horns like those it had to be a Gotal. "Get over here, you big battlewagon."

Woyiq shuffled even closer.

"You found her?" Daye whispered. "She's all right?"

The beefy man laid a hand on Daye's synthflesh-bandaged shoulder. Both of his legs had been crushed, too, and one hand ... and they didn't dare carry him out to a medic. "She was at Happy's Landing, hanging out with the band. You guessed it right."

Daye swallowed. Even that small movement hurt. "Did you..."

"I told her we found no survivors. She—"

"Thanks. Thanks, both of you." Daye shut his eyes. He couldn't bear to hear how Tinian had taken the news of his alleged death, not yet. He half wished he could dissolve his body into nothingness and turn Woyiq's fatal pronouncement into fact.

But evidently the universe had spared him ... most of him ... for a while. He couldn't drag Tinian into the furtive existence he meant to lead now. Woyiq and his Gotal accomplice promised to sponsor him straight to the Rebellion as soon as II Avali calmed down. The Rebellion needed his talents. They might be able to fix him up, too ... somewhat.

In the meantime, he had decided it had to be kinder to let Tinian think him dead. She'd leave Druckenwell. Witty and capable, she'd make a new life.

He would never love anyone else, though. "Good-bye, Tinian," he murmured toward the wall. "May the Force be with you."

Customs bustled, quadruple anything Tinian had ever seen—but they passed, just as Cheever predicted. Tinian followed him up a stale passageway into the transport's fourth-class hold. They found seats close to Yccakic's. Redd rode in the cargo hold, guarding the doctored instruments.

Tinian slumped down, glad this hold had no viewport. No last glimpse of Druckenwell would linger in her memory.

Alone in the galaxy except for two virtual strangers and an armload of illicit electronics, she'd find some way to help bring down the New Order. Every time she hurt Palpatine's Empire just a little bit, she'd dedicate that small victory to the memory of Daye Azur-Jamin and the life they could have had.

*Force be with you, love.* Leaning back, Tinian squeezed tears out of her eyes and braced for takeoff.

# The Final Exit

## by Patricia A. Jackson

A planet of interminable extremes, Najiba existed in a state of perpetual spring, delineating seasons in terms of electrical disruptions and torrential rainstorms. Ross stared into the maturing squall, intrigued by the erratic veins of lightning which arced across the obscure, night skies. Sheltered beneath his YT-1300 light freighter, the *Kierra*, the Corellian searched the turbulent atmosphere above the open flight pad, following several amorphous shapes that loomed above the heavy cloud cover.

Clipped with military precision, soft spikes of blond hair glistened with the rain as miniature drops accumulated in the longer length above his ears. Yawning, the smuggler leaned against one of the support struts. His sleepy, blue eyes stared from the shadows, regarding several natives who were huddled beneath the storm eaves of Reuther's Wetdock.

"194?"

Pressing the comlink against his cheek, Ross responded, "194."

Alluring, a feminine voice replied, "What's the deal, Ross? We've been sitting here for over an hour."

"Are you bored, darling?" he teased, grinning handsomely in the dim light.

"Do you want an honest answer or just my opinion? Come on, flyboy," she pleaded, "let's get moving."

"Don't get your circuits in a bunch." Affectionately he brushed a hand over the lower turret, wondering in what section of the onboard systems she was hiding. Fondly named after his ship, the feisty droid intelligence had a tendency to focus on the optical sensors, possessed by an unusually feminine curiosity.

"*Ol'val*, Ross," a voice greeted from nearby.

Despite the familiarity of the Old Corellian dialect, Ross tensed, casually thumbing the restraint from his blaster. Propping the heavy pistol against the holster, he stared into the closest shadows and focused on the stooped silhouette. "Reuther?"

The aging Najib bartender stepped into the rain, humbled beneath the onslaught of cold drops. Sheltered below the *Kierra*, he straightened, staring into the young Corellian's face.

Vivacious with old-world charm, his eyes were discerning and perceptive, contemplating Ross from head to toe. Meeting the smuggler's mischievous eyes, a proud smile played across his lips. "I see where you made the billboards in Mos Eisley last week. The Imperials are offering 5,000 credits for your head."

"Is that all?"

"Indeed," the old man chuckled. "Not nearly enough for a rogue with your credentials." Billowed red sleeves ballooned from Reuther's frail shoulders and arms, clashing with an oversized native tunic. Dampened by the rain, thinning gray hair was tightly braided against his freckled scalp. "It's good to see you, boy," Reuther whispered. Uncorking an intricately carved bottle, he poured a generous portion into a crystal goblet and handed it to the smuggler.

"Corellian whisky?" Ross questioned, sniffing the bitter aroma. "What's the occasion?"



“Growing old,” Reuther croaked, nervously glancing over his shoulder, “and to having the strength to face tomorrow.”

Suspicious, Ross followed the bartender’s anxious eyes. “Quiet night, Reuther?” he asked, cautiously moving a hand to his blaster.

Sadly, the old man shook his head. “This is a desolate place when the Children of Najiba come home.”

Familiar with the Children of Najiba, Ross scanned the night skies, well acquainted with the peculiar asteroid belt that had mysteriously claimed an orbit around the small planet. As ominous as the shattered rock moving above their heads, Ross discerned the somber tone of Reuther’s voice. “Your message said it was urgent.”

Muffled by the warm bodies crowded at the narrow blast door, a strangled scream suddenly erupted from the bar. The despondent cry fluctuated, a cacophony of sobs, which peaked above the violence of the storm.

“Just watch, my boy,” Reuther cautioned. “I brought you here for a reason.”

The crowd broke ranks, scattering away from the bulkhead frame. A Najib man, wearing the clumsy beige uniform of a port control steward, staggered from the bar, collapsing in the street. Cradled in his arms, he carried the slender, motionless body of a Twi’lek woman. Her pale, blue skin glistened with rain, faultless and smooth despite the cruelty of the shadows. With the delicate poise of a dancer, elegant arms swayed above her head, exaggerating the gentle arch of her neck and shoulders. Scantly clad in a faded tunic, her frail form convulsed in the steward’s arms.

“That’s Lathaam,” Reuther began, “our port official, and that,” he hesitated, “that used to be his woman, Arruna.”

Ross shrugged the tension from his chest and shoulders, massaging a pinched nerve in his neck. “What happened?”

“Adalric Brandl happened,” he replied evenly. “He blew in about 10 hours ago, demanding a ship with a pilot who could

shoot as well as fly.” Sighing, he added, “Well, you know the rule, Ross. When the Children of Najiba are home, no traffic on or off the planet. Lathaam, being the choob-head he is, made the mistake of informing Brandl of that fact.” The anxious Najib rubbed the narrow ridge between his eyes. “Lathaam always did lack diplomacy skills.”

“So Brandl killed the girl?”

“I ain’t saying what he did.” From the safety of the shadows, Reuther watched the lurid scene. Dubious, he averted his eyes, throwing his hands up with exasperation. “Truth is, Ross, Brandl never touched her. Never laid a hand on her,” he puffed, “yet there she lies, dead. And there ain’t nobody on the planet, not even you, who can tell me Brandl *didn’t* do it.”

“You’ve been living with the natives too long.”

“I know what you’re thinking, boy,” Reuther scoffed. “Remember, I was once a bounty hunter, too. Brandl never pulled a blaster. Doesn’t even have one.” The bartender cleared his throat noisily, spitting into the wind. “His kind don’t need blasters to kill.” Shuddering visibly, he mumbled, “He’s a 10–96 if I ever saw one.”

“A 10–96?” Ross whispered.

“If you don’t know, you better look it up,” Reuther snorted. “Your life may depend on it.”

Ignoring the patriarchal cynicism, Ross crossed his arms over his chest. “Where do I fit into all of this?”

“Brandl wants a pilot who can handle himself. I told him I knew a dozen or more suicide jocks who would come through the asteroids just to make an easy 1,000 credits ... then I told him about you.”

“Come on, Reuther,” Ross snorted musically. “One man comes along and has the whole town running scared? Whatever happened to your militia?”

“Is that what it’s called?” Reuther scoffed. Staring at the backs of the prying mob, he spat, “Farmers! All of them! Eager to bite every stranger, but afraid of stepping on their own tails. Look at

them!” He stared into the small assembly gathered around the body. “It’s easy to look into another man’s misery and do nothing.”

Grumbling among themselves, the crowd abruptly retreated into the street as a shadow moved from the back of the bar. Eclipsing the dim light radiating from the bulkhead, the stranger faltered in the doorway. “That’ll be him,” Reuther whispered. “I’ll pay you 2,000 credits on top of whatever he offers you. Just get him off the planet!” Stepping back into the rain, he hesitated. “There’s a bad noise about this one, Ross. Watch yourself.”

Captivated by the peculiar events surrounding this outsider, Ross cautiously observed the reaction of the locals as Brandl swept past them, drawing the shadows in his wake. Struck by the unusual beauty of the stranger’s face, the smuggler found it difficult to believe that such a man was capable of violence. Handsome, almost cavalier by appearance, Brandl’s nose and chin were chiseled with stony nobility, polished by a quiet arrogance that aroused the smuggler’s suspicions. Faded laugh lines framed a narrow mouth and thin lips.

Thick, dark waves of hair glistened with rain, interspersed with strands of white, which ran from his temples to the nape of his neck. As foreboding as the shadows of Brandl’s face, the robe draped from his shoulders seemed to absorb the darkness about them, concealing any weapons and his hands from view. “Captain Thaddeus Ross?”

Wincing with mention of his first name, Ross brushed his duster aside, revealing his blaster and his hand poised over the heel. “Adalric Brandl?” he replied curtly.

Cordial, a genteel smile played across Brandl’s pale lips, drawing a sharp angle over his prominent cheekbones. “I’ll be brief, Captain. I need transport to the Trulalis system.”

“Trulalis? You could catch the local skipper for half of what I’m likely to charge. Private transports don’t come cheap.”

“Integrity comes without price, Captain Ross. The bar owner assured me that you were a man of integrity.” Squaring his

shoulders, Brandl probed the smuggler's calculating eyes. "I'm offering 5,000 credits for transport to Trulalis, where you will accompany me to the Kovit Settlement."

"I don't leave port for less than 6,000," Ross countered, narrowing his eyes. "If you want company, it'll cost you extra: 1,500 credits."

"Agreed," Brandl whispered. Graceful, his long fingers retrieved a sealed credit chit. "Three thousand now and the rest on completion of my business."

Eyeing the sealed chit, Ross gushed, "Right this way." The smuggler extended his arm toward the freighter's lowered ramp. "Kierra, prepare to raise ship."

"Well it's about time!" she hissed. "I thought my docking struts were going to take root here."

Ross cast a final glance to the bar, saluting Reuther and the others who were watching from the sanctuary of the shadows. Confidently pocketing the credit chit, he flashed a reassuring smile and jogged up the ramp. Initializing the hatch seal, he moved along the familiar corridor toward the flight compartment. The Corellian grinned impishly, listening to Kierra's vindictive voice, as she engaged their peculiar passenger.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded. "Never mind where I am. I'm where I belong, but you—"

"Kierra," Ross whispered, "meet our new client."

Seething with the brunt of Brandl's initial arrogance, Kierra vehemently blustered, "*Halle metes chun, petchuk!*"

"*Koccic sulng!*" Ross scolded, shocked by the scathing Old Corellian insult.

Pleasantly, Brandl returned his thanks for the rude statement and offered a challenge. "*Onna Julle guth.*"

Before the droid intelligence could recoup for the invitation, Ross glared into one of her optical lenses. "That's enough!" he fired at her. "Open the power coupling and charge the main booster," he ordered. "Now, Kierra!"

Discharge static hissed over the internal comm, similar to the indignant gnashing of teeth. “Affirmative, boss,” she replied.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Ross leaned against the interior hull wall, listening for the ignition of the ion engines. Focused on Brandl’s insidious eyes, he whispered, “There aren’t too many people who remember the Old Corellian dialect.”

“In the course of my career, I’ve had to speak many languages.” Cautiously, Brandl added, “I was ... am ... an actor.”

“I don’t usually transport passengers,” Ross confessed. Stepping through the low bulkhead, he activated the interior corridor lamps. “You’re welcome to use my quarters.”

Brandl’s gaze swept the length of the modest passenger cabin. Hesitant to enter, he paused in the bulkhead frame. “How long until we reach Trulalis?”

“An hour?” Ross shrugged dubiously. “I’ll notify you when we arrive.”

“Thank you, Captain, your hospitality is appreciated.”

“Yeah, I bet it is,” the Corellian mumbled under his breath. As the hatch automatically sealed behind him, he retraced his steps to the flight compartment. “Kierra, set the astrogation system for Trulalis.”

“Check.”

Sitting down in the acceleration chair, Ross quickly glanced over the flight console. “Okay, darling, bring up the emergency auto-pilot program we installed this morning.”

“Not today, Ross,” Kierra pouted. “I have a headache.” Observing his reaction from several optical lenses, she dampened his fury, whining, “You forgot to cut the restraint servos, flyboy. So don’t blame me for the glitch.” A hushed snicker translated across the internal comm. “By the way, where’d you dig up the spook? He gives me the chills, Thadd.”

“I told you not to call me that!” Ross hissed. Glaring into an optic sensor, he roughly booted the throttle, causing the freighter to shudder and slide on the pad.

"Gently, gently," Kierra cooed. Vexed by his dark mood, she added, "I hate it when you get this way. Your manners—"

"Never mind my manners!" Curbing his temper, he flipped a series of flight switches. The freighter shifted beneath him, resisting the planet's gravity as it rose from the external dock. "You just think about minding your manners," he scolded. Checking the data readouts for the latest asteroid activity, the Corellian grumbled, "Brandl's paying 8,000 creds for this trip, that's almost half a load of spice. You could at least try to humor him."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"And while I have your attention, run a code check on a 10–96."

"That's easy. It's listed by Imperial enforcement protocol as a mentally imbalanced person."

"No, there's got to be something more to it," he contemplated. "There must be something else. Research the dead files on all 10-codes with that designation."

"That could take some time."

"Good!" he snapped. "I want every description for a 10–96, everything from Imperial databases to Old Republic records."

Resistantly, Kierra replied, "Affirmative, boss."

Accompanied by a low hum, the hyperdrive cue flashed intermittently, recalculating the jump to hyperspace. Checking the onboard systems, Ross observed hyperactivity in the library programs, where Kierra was researching the peculiar 10-code. "Stand by, hyperdrive engaging," he announced, piping into the ship-wide intercom. Bracing himself against the acceleration chair, Ross activated the motivator, propelling himself, his passenger, and his ship into the multicolored explosion of hyperspace.

In the lower cradle of the ship, Ross sat in the swivel gunner's chair, swinging side to side, absently strumming his fingers

against the turret firing controls. He closed his eyes and massaged a muscle spasm in his shoulder, wincing as the clenched tendon tightened then released. Oblivious to the spectacular display of light and color beyond the narrow viewscreen, he relaxed against the cool leather brace, drifting into the serenity of sleep.

“You know,” Kierra whispered, “you make the cutest faces when you’re asleep.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” he lied, suppressing a yawn.

“Well heads up, flyboy! I have some intriguing data for you.”

Ross sat up, rubbing the circulation back into his ears. “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, it seems that your mysterious 10–96 dates back long before the 10-code setup even existed. Now, according to the description, and I must admit I’m perplexed, the 10–96 came from an Old Corellian word, *ke’dem*.”

Staring into the hyperspace vortex, Ross mentally mouthed the word. “Go on.”

“Go on?” Kierra snorted. “That’s it! Since before the Empire, a 10–96 has had two definitions, an imbalanced person and a *ke’dem*.” Hesitant, she whispered, “Now without overinflating your ego ... what’s a *ke’dem*?”

“It’s a variation of Old Corellian that means condemned or fallen.”

“Well that would explain the modern terminology.”

“Yeah,” he whispered, “it would also explain what happened down there on the planet.” The smuggler cupped his hands together, supporting his head and neck. “Kierra, darling, Adalric Brandl is a Jedi Knight.”

“A Jedi? That would explain a lot of things.” Momentarily, her optic sensor dimmed. “Stand by. Hyperdrive about to disengage. Three ... two ... one.”

Leaning against the gunner’s panic bar, Ross felt the vibration of the ion drives, set to ignite once the transition was complete. “Easy on the drive coils, Kierra.”

“Aren’t you coming to the bridge?” she asked.

“On my way,” he replied, “but first I have to collect our unusual guest.”

Blanketed by a protective cloud layer, the planet Trulalis was richly embellished with a spectacular landscape of verdant green. A mosaic of rolling grasslands, sprawling forests, and spacious oceans stood as an invitation to paradise for the space-weary traveler. Crisscrossed and separated at irregular intervals by feral wilderness, Trulalis offered innumerable flat fields for small transports to dock. Ross made a mental note to mark this planet as a potential checkpoint on his smuggling runs. A brief sensor scan pinpointed the closest suitable landing field. Compensating for the subtle shifts on the ground surface, he set down near a small hamlet.

On the surface, Ross shouldered his travel tote and secured an extra power pack to his holster. From the top of the ramp, he hesitated in the corridor, glimpsing Brandl from the corner of his eye. The eccentric Jedi was waiting for him outside on the trail, shadowed by the towering visage of the black trees. A seemingly invincible statue, the strange man stood with solemn conviction, staring into the hazy silhouette of the late afternoon sun. “Kierra, I’m still not sure what Brandl’s up to. Keep your eyes open.”

“Keep your comlink open,” she replied. “You know how I worry.”

“That’s my girl,” the Corellian chuckled.

Testing the soft earth beneath his boots, Ross strolled up to the familiar silhouette of his passenger. For the first time since leaving Najiba, he noted that both of Brandl’s hands were visible, one of them swathed haphazardly in a black bandage. Through gaps in the makeshift dressing, he saw the tender pink of raw flesh and yellow seepage draining into the thick fabric.

Before Ross could question him, Brandl turned and started along the trail. “What did the Najib tell you about me?”

“He said you killed a Twi’lek girl,” Ross blurted. After a moment he pressed, “Did you?”



The Jedi's reply was abrupt and forthright. "Yes." Brandl hesitated as the Corellian snorted reprovingly. "Please Captain, your contempt is small reward for a repentant pilgrim."

"You call murder a penance?" Ross spat.

"When it has become the least of one's crimes," the Jedi paused dramatically, "yes."

Brandl's apathy toward the woman's death was chilling, sending shudders throughout the Corellian's body. "How? You never touched her." Ross grasped Brandl's sleeve and pulled. "How did you do it!"

"I asphyxiated her."

"She suffocated? In an open room?"

"A sophisticated talent," Brandl sneered, "not meant for the faint of heart."

"You sound proud of yourself, Jedi!" Ross spat with contempt. "Makes you feel good to kill an innocent woman?"

"Evil springs from weakness and weakness from ambition; by this grand order every ambitious man is undone!" Deliberately, the Jedi challenged, "Tell me, Captain, you too are an ambitious man. Which of us is truly innocent?"

"Should I applaud now!" Ross taunted.

"If you wish!"

"Well before I hand over your accolades, tell me something. Was that a real line or just something you made up to ease your conscience?"

Petulant with the smuggler's indignation, Brandl turned on him. "If it's retribution you wish for me, Captain Ross, then I suggest you stay close at hand." Scowling furiously, he stared down his long nose. "You may yet have your satisfaction."

Provoked by the sinister edge in Brandl's voice, Ross drew his blaster. The Jedi apparently heard him, and spun around to face the blaster. Ross fired a three-round burst at the Jedi. Honed by several seasons as a bounty hunter, he centered the bolts to explode in the square of Brandl's broad shoulders. Before the deadly energy could land its mark, Brandl deftly snatched a

cylindrical object from his belt. Momentarily, a narrow shaft of white brilliance ignited from the base, feinting and parrying with the precise motions of the Jedi's wrists. Deflected by the lightsaber, the blaster bolts were harmlessly shot off into the field.

Aghast, Ross could only watch as the destructive rounds dissipated into oblivion. Abruptly, he felt the crushing pinch of invisible fingers clenched against his throat, constricting his airway and lungs. Choking, the smuggler dropped to his knees as the serene landscape of Trulalis blurred before him. Gradually, the sensation faded, leaving the Corellian gasping to catch his breath.

"There is one rule of theater that applies to real life, Captain Ross," Brandl declared. "*Only heroes die*. Villains and cowards are left to suffer." Turning his back on the panting pilot, he snarled, "Now come along."

Ross shook the haze from his vision. "Is that another line?" he slurred lethargically.

Brandl trembled, visibly drained as he disengaged the lightsaber with required effort. "Not just a line, Captain, but an astute warning to the less-than-humble pilgrim." Securing the lightsaber to his belt, the Jedi momentarily scanned the pale skies. "The settlement is less than a kilometer away. We had best move along. It will be dark soon."

Swearing off bruises, Ross bitterly wedged his pack against his shoulder and jammed his blaster into the holster. Quickly brushing past Brandl, he hissed, "Can't imagine why you'd be afraid of the dark."

Nestled within the dominant embrace of a mountain range, Kovit was well-protected from the harsh weather conditions of the northern highlands and the windswept plains of the coastal region. Staring down the mound into the modest farming community, Ross could vaguely discern movement in the dusty streets. Drawn by diminutive banthas, wagons creaked through the wide avenues. Dozens of people walked the streets, pausing

to chat with a neighbor or to haggle over the local street merchant's wares. From a side alley, three boys grunted and sweated behind a battered landspeeder, coaxing the vehicle's engines to briefly ignite. Nearby, above the sporadic choke of the repulsorcraft, laughter betrayed a trio of children playing with an obsolete astromech droid.

Brandl hesitated at the crest of the mound, staring down into the settlement, as if reconsidering his options. Wilted, the Jedi's shoulders exposed a reluctance to continue. "Where are you from, Captain Ross?"

Startled by the abrupt question, Ross stammered, "Corellia originally."

"Do you find returning there difficult?"

"Homecomings are always hard." The Corellian shrugged, pursing his lips doubtfully. "At least for some of us."

Without further reply, Brandl continued down the trail, deliberately slowing his stride. Vacillating, he stepped through the settlement gates, as if expecting some invisible force field to bar his path. Nostalgically passing through the prudent rows of farm cottages, the Jedi admired the mastery of native architecture, as sculpted from the indigenous lumber. Herb gardens and prized flower beds adorned the private lawns, each tenderly manicured and maintained with fastidious care. As they approached the dry, dusty oval of the settlement common, Brandl covered his eyes, protecting them from the fading sun, as he stared into the rich, agricultural outback of the settlement, which extended far beyond the limits of the community to the base of the mountains themselves.

From the near center of Kovit, a macabre specter of architecture loomed above the rustic rooftops. Flyaway buttresses supported the main construction of the theater, unfurling like stony wings from the base. Packed with chalk-white limestone, the obelisk was unequivocally straight, seeming to elongate into the obscuring skies. Established intentionally in the heart of the settlement, the theater captured the waning rays

of the sun, momentarily stealing the glory from the picturesque village. There was a somber sense of belonging that drew Brandl toward the structure, ignoring the startled glares of the settlement denizens.

As they passed through the outskirts of the community, Ross nervously observed a makeshift hangar and the crude snout of a Z-95 jutting from the narrow bay doors. The starfighter appeared operational, though crowded by its diminutive shelter, and eager for a skirmish. Distracted by the presence of strangers, several men gathered just beyond the shadows of the small livery, watching intently.

Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, Ross cautiously whispered, "Your adoring fans?"

"Neighbors, patrons, old friends." Brandl abruptly paused in the street, as if awakening from an illusion. "But that was another lifetime."

"Where do they stand in this lifetime?" the smuggler growled.

"Strangers."

Weaving through the haze of the fragrant gardens surrounding the theater courtyard, a woman and a young boy moved along the grainy, stone paths. The echo of their voices chimed with laughter as a private joke was shared between them. Brandl watched intently as they walked through the haze and into the dusty streets.

Fiery, auburn spirals cascaded from the woman's head, crowning her oval face. Unusually pale skin flushed in the faded brilliance, betraying an aversion to excessive sunlight. Tall but gangly, the boy was no older than 11 or 12 years. Broad shoulders framed his upper torso, seemingly too heavy for his slender form. Coordinated and rhythmic, his long legs showed nothing less than the promise of sharp, steady growth.

Startled by the dark apparition of Brandl, the woman hesitated and stood motionless in the street, meeting the Jedi's friendless eyes. The smile parting her full lips was quickly forgotten. Puzzled by her peculiar behavior, the child swept his gaze from

her stony face to Brandl. Registering nothing more than a stranger, the boy leaned over his mother's arm and whispered something in her ear.

Obviously distraught, she pulled the child snugly against her and hurriedly continued their trek across the common. Brandl sighed remorsefully, then without explanation, resumed his walk toward the old theater. Beyond the archaic gate a decade or more of wild flowers had claimed the inner recesses of the theater yard, staggering the once straight path to the massive bulkhead doors. Residing over the darkened antechamber, bronze statues and sculpted metalwork lined the interior corridor.

Adalric Brandl moved gracefully into these familiar shadows, intuitively stalking the darkened corridors and spacious hallways beyond. The hollow shell of his memories traced the outlines and silhouettes of each molded tapestry, a display case of tarnished prop swords and shields, and finally the grand hall, where past audiences had come to experience the stage productions.

Ignoring the Corellian behind him, Brandl quickened his steps, moving into the immense auditorium. Deafening, the familiar resonating of applause and encouragement thundered and echoed inside his ears; but this illusion was short-lived. There was no audience to applaud, no actors to bow, no stage settings, nor props as he remembered them. The yawning mouth of the stage was disgracefully bare.

"Who is there?" a voice whispered from the darkness.

Brandl faltered, supporting himself in the elaborately carved doorway.

A thin, frail figure emerged from the darkness of the inner aisle. "Come closer," he gently commanded.

From the shadows along the back wall, Ross scanned the theater for other signs of movement. Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, he waited quietly in the musty wings of the chamber as Brandl continued into the hall toward the shadowy form.

"Adalric Brandl, is that you?" the old man croaked pleasantly.

“Master Otias,” Brandl whispered, kneeling at his mentor’s feet. “I am ashamed that you care to remember me.”

Otias ignited a glow rod, casting a warm beam of light across his scaling face. He was dressed in a faded gray tunic, stained with lamp oil and sweat. The veins and muscles of his arms were pronounced and defined, built up from a lifetime of toil and lean with age. Clouded gray eyes were nearly imperceptible against a splash of dark spots and freckles. “Since when did shame ever come between an actor and his task director?” Brushing a trembling hand through his thinning silver mane, Otias whispered, “It’s been 12 long years, Adalric. What brings you back to this stage?”

“Master O—” Brandl fell silent, cutting himself short.

“Come, come lad ... there is nothing more obvious than an actor with a need to confess.”

Abruptly, Brandl cowered beneath the glow rod. “I ... I live my life ... in a whirlwind!”

Dignified, Otias beamed proudly, recognizing the famous line. “Old Soveryn’s final words of the fourth act. How closely you’ve come to rivalling his life.” Resigned, the aging taskmaster sighed, a lifetime of exhaustion evident by his labored breathing. “Actors are granted license to live a thousand lives, Adalric; but you, you chose to live a thousand lies. If you have come to me as your advocate then speak from your heart, not from the void of a tragic character who has never been born.”

Spittle flying from the corners of his mouth, Brandl raged, “I cannot!”

“Every tragic figure is tainted by a flaw, possessed by a need to save the world or himself from some unpardonable crime. No man can set himself before humanity and judge it, not without himself being judged.” Otias gently unwrapped the makeshift bandage swathed about Brandl’s left hand, wincing at the severity of the burn. The lightsaber’s cauterizing bite was undeniable. “When we pursue shadows, we are destined to find the

darkness.” Staring into Brandl’s face, Otias whispered, “And as you well know, the dark side has always had its price.”

“What happened to me?” Brandl implored.

“You stared into the collective pith of all beings and judged it, without first looking into your own heart. Frustrated, you went looking for the tragic flaw without much success. When the Emperor came calling, you couldn’t resist!” Otias whispered, “No one knows darkness better than a Jedi Knight, and no one was more suited to play such a role than you.”

“I killed a woman!” Brandl gasped. “Suffocated her! I could feel her heart in my hand ... in my mind! And I squeezed and squeezed—”

“You’ve killed many,” Otias accused. “The Emperor has no blood on his hands; but he keeps an army of others who do.”

“Otias, please, help me find the way.”

“The way of the Force brings balance to the anarchy of life; but you Adalric,” he shook his head reprovingly, “you didn’t want balance. Your pride was so great and despite my warnings, you went in search of the unatoneable crime, which inevitably separates the hero from the indigent masses. And you found it, didn’t you?”

Gasping for breath, Brandl croaked, “Yes! It was within me, within my black heart the whole time.”

“It lies within all of us,” Otias whispered, “if we dare to see.” Exhausted, he sighed bitterly, again brushing a hand through his thinning hair. “I cannot vindicate you of the evil that you have brought upon yourself, an evil that you have wielded in the name of the Emperor for so long. I’ve spent the last decade watching, waiting for your return, rehearsing what I would say to you.” Sadly, he whispered, “What you ask, I cannot give you. There can be no redemption for your crimes. The dead cannot forgive.” Extinguishing the lamp, Otias turned his back on the distraught Jedi and moved away toward the stage.

Brandl slowly turned from the familiar silhouette, stung by the reality of Otias’s words. Pressing the damp bandage against his

wounded palm, he stepped into the outer arena, moving into the darkened wings in the rear of the theater. Without comment, he retraced his steps through the spacious corridors, past the archaic displays, and into the courtyard beyond the doors. Steeling himself against the violent images sparking through his mind, the Jedi surrendered to Trulalis's last waning sunlight, imagining that the impotent rays had the power to burn into his flesh.

Angrily, he fumbled beneath his robes, producing a large cylindrical object. Ross flinched momentarily, traumatized by his encounter with the Jedi's lightsaber. With recovering confidence, he noted that this object was much larger and was covered with minute control levers and data screens. As if wrenching the neck of an invisible foe, Brandl twisted the object before replacing it within his robes. Lightly, he heard the smuggler's footsteps behind him, moving with guarded discretion, as if to avoid disturbing his troubled thoughts. "I prefer your contempt, Captain," he whispered, his eyes flashing with violence. "Your pity disgusts me." Extending his long stride, he stormed out of the theater yard, unhindered by the thickened dust at his feet.

Framed by the dark cowl of the forest canopy, the Kierra's ivory hull gleamed, a smooth, round tooth jutting from the heath. Guided by these moonlight reflections, Ross stumbled through the rutted trail, twisting his ankles against unseen rocks. "Kierra, lights!"

Squinting into the brilliant array of search beacons, the smuggler shivered, pulling the collar of his duster across his neck. A potent wind was descending from the high country, bringing with it the promise of rain. Inside the ramp corridor, Ross brushed a hand through his hair, reassured by the warmth flooding the freighter's interior. "Pump up the main boosters," he ordered with distraction, noting that Brandl had not followed him onto the ship.



Growing accustomed to the Jedi's erratic mood swings, Ross peered from the protection of the ramp door. Below him, standing at the foot of the ramp, Brandl stood motionless staring into the darkness as pale mists crawled over his shoulders and beneath his feet. "Brandl?" With his smuggler's sense aroused, Ross ordered, "Kierra, kill the exterior lamps."

"You can come out now," Brandl whispered, as the austere beacons were extinguished. "No one will harm you."

Ross pressed himself against the interior hull wall, propping his blaster and steadying his arm and shoulder to draw a clear shot. Hearing him, Brandl stared up into the darkened passage, disarming the Corellian with his sharp gaze. As the lanky figure of a boy emerged from the heath, Ross could feel the tension fade and stepped off the ramp, recognizing the child from their brief encounter in the settlement. Dressed in dark green clothes to match the forest at night, the child's face was flushed and sweated. Cautiously, he approached the two men and the freighter.

Awed by the sight of Brandl, enshrouded by darkness, yet haloed by the moon, the child moved gingerly toward the ship, compelled by an insatiable curiosity. He made no effort to shield his wonder, noting every measure of the figure before his eyes, as if committing his mere presence to memory. "It's true," the boy whispered. "You are a Jedi Knight."

"Who are you?" Brandl demanded, but there was no strength in his words. Even Ross could detect the half lie of denial trembling in his voice.

Handsome, the child grinned, turning his face up to meet his father's eyes. "Don't you know me?" he asked. Staring intently at the lightsaber swinging from the Jedi's belt, the boy angrily cried, "You named me! Jaalib, remember?" Recovering his manners, he rubbed the toe of his shoe into the yielding earth. "My last name is Brandl too."

Gently, Brandl caressed the boy's hair and cheeks, feeling the smooth skin beneath his fingertips. It was a peculiar sensation,

which fired every nerve across his body. Despite the tenderness of that caress, Ross felt a sense of unease crawling into his belly.

"Is that a real lightsaber? I've never seen one." Chatty, the youngster added, "I've seen props for the stage, but ..." His soft, tenor voice fluttered, prey to the silence as Brandl handed the weapon to him. Staring at it, Jaalib reached hesitantly for the lightsaber, then dropped his hand.

"Don't be afraid," Brandl urged.

"I'm not afraid," Jaalib said with confidence, taking his father's hand, rather than the lightsaber. A thin film of tears glistened in the corner of his eyes. Swallowing the emotion, Jaalib whispered, "I've come to warn you. I heard Menges and the others talking. They're angry that you came back to the settlement. Mother doesn't think they'll do anything; but I know that Menges has a ship."

Overhearing the boy, Ross snapped, "Kierra, check the sensors!"

Abruptly, the interior corridor lights went dark. "I suggest that you all duck!"

A tremendous explosion erupted near the aft of the ship and forest perimeter, accompanied by the afterburn blast of an outgoing starfighter. Dodging churned up roots, debris, and stone particles, Ross slid under the ramp, diving for cover beneath the freighter's hull. Sparks and molten debris scattered about his head and shoulders, singeing his clothing and hair. Thrashing wildly, he swiped the heated material from his skin. Nearby, Brandl was helping the frightened boy to his feet, whispering encouraging words to the traumatized child.

"Damage report."

"They got us, boss," Kierra pined. "Concussion missile." There was a brief pause as she analyzed the incoming data. "Shields are out. Engines are at 70 percent. There's a good chance the ion coils may seize if we push them too far."

"Can we lift off?"

“With you at the reins, flyboy,” she chuckled, “anything’s possible.”

Protectively embracing the boy against him, Brandl whispered, “As long as we don’t make ourselves known, he will pass.”

“Look,” Ross barked, “this is all very touching, but that last pass was just to get an approximate location. Next time—” he snorted anxiously, “forget it, I’m not waiting around for next time. Let’s scratch gravel, now!”

Agitated by the sudden turn of events, Brandl cupped the boy’s face in his hands. “Does your mother know you’re here?”

“No.”

“Then ...” Brandl stammered, “how did you know?”

Playfully holding his father’s hands, Jaalib smiled, “Otias told me the truth a long time ago. He let me watch the holos of your stage work. Mother didn’t like it at first, but she came with me and she cried the whole time.” Sadly, the boy glanced away, avoiding Brandl’s eyes. “When we saw you in the settlement common, as soon as we got home she started to cry. So I knew it was you.” Staring at Ross, the boy frowned, knowing the inevitable parting was soon at hand. “Will you ever come home?”

Brandl cradled Jaalib’s smooth cheeks and gently kissed the child’s forehead. “I can make no promises.”

Jaalib forced a smile. “I understand. Otias said that you had other important roles to play, parts that a small world like Trulalis could never offer.” Clinging to his father’s presence, the boy whispered, “When I’m old enough, I’m going to act offworld too. Otias said that he would help.” He hesitated. “I want to be as great as you are, Father.” The thin film of tears returned, threatening to spill over his cheeks. “I won’t ever forget you.” Using the thick canopy of the forest as a shield, Jaalib sprinted down the trail and vanished into the night shadows.

“They never told him the truth,” Brandl swallowed desperately, fighting back his emotions.

“Why didn’t you tell him?” Ross snarled, sealing the outer hatch.

"You give me credit for courage? A man of courage is a man of conviction, Captain Ross." Brushing past the Corellian, the Jedi whispered, "I lost mine the moment I chose to believe in old legends."

Throwing himself into the acceleration seat, Ross frantically began throwing the flight controls. His hands moved diligently across the console with consummate skill. Roused by the threat of a hostile star fighter swinging in on the sensor scope, he initialized the booster ignition, cradling the crippled ship in his hands. A low whine engulfed the flight cabin in static echoes and vibrations as the ion drive labored to lift the freighter. The metallic rattle of the deck plates reverberated through every corridor and in the spacious cargo bay.

"Oh," Kierra groaned, "that sounds bad."

"Never mind how it sounds, get started on bringing the shield generators on line!" Struggling to maintain control of the freighter, Ross brawled with the partially ionized throttle, maximizing the power output through the damaged engine.

"The hard part will be getting through the atmosphere," Brandl whispered, glancing over the readout screens.

"We may never get off the ground!" Ross grumbled. "Kierra, where is he?"

"One Z-95 Headhunter, headed right for us and according to my readings, the ship exceeds the normal weight ratio for its class."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning more concussion missiles. He's fully loaded."

"Power up the main sentry turret," Ross mumbled, concentrating on the hampered freighter. "When will the shield generator come on line?"

"Give me five more minutes. Hydraulic pressure is building to functional levels."

"Well hurry it along. At this rate, we won't even get into space before he catches us." Ross stared into the underlying blanket of

the lower atmosphere, shrouding his departure in the frenzy of night mist. "What can you do about fixing the ion drive?"

"Think happy thoughts," Kierra replied. "We have no cargo. We have no surplus material. And," she added with a hint of feminine pride, "this ship has always been under its weight ratio. We're lighter than a Gamorrean brain sack."

"How long before he intercepts us?"

"Let's just say I'm putting up the shields now."

Abruptly, the modified light freighter shook with the impact concussion of another direct hit. Bucking beneath the powerful blow, the *Kierra* drifted beneath the cloud cover as the destructive energy ricocheted over the aft shields, dissipating harmlessly against the hull.

"Damage?" Ross panted.

"The shields took it," Kierra replied wearily, still accessing the information from her multiple systems. "But the hydraulic level is already dropping. We won't survive much more of that."

Angling across the stratosphere, the Headhunter aggressively continued its pursuit. Hampered by the thickened atmosphere of Trulalis, it swayed from side to side, approaching for another strafing run.

Arming the lower turret, Kierra interfaced with the sentry gun, timing a sporadic burst across the forefront of the attacking ship. Not expecting retaliation from the crippled freighter, the fighter stuttered through the atmosphere, its left wing section erupting into flames. Avoiding the turret's deadly accuracy, the Z-95 dropped back, barrelling out of range. "That should keep his head down for a while."

"Not long enough," Ross argued. Eluding Brandl's cautious eye, he grumbled, "If there's something in your Jedi survival book, now's the time to spring it."

Brandl nodded, his face notably drained and haggard. Reaching inside the fold of his robe, he again produced the peculiar capsule. The cylindrical-shaped device was cleverly fitted for concealment as a hydrospanner or mechanic's tool. Staring at

the object, Ross recognized it from their brief excursion at the theater. As he watched, fascinated, the control head flashed intermittently from a hidden power cell.

“What’s that?” Kierra crooned. Intrigued by the odd unit, her optical orb brightened, extending the focus on the transmitter.

“It’s a transponder,” Brandl replied. “And it’s been transmitting for nearly an hour.” The Jedi sighed with effort, leaning against the broad back of the acceleration chair. In the harsh light of the flight cabin, his arrogance could not hide the gaunt cheeks and stress lines that had begun eroding the handsome visage of a once proud man. The morbid signs of resignation and surrender were easily read in his noble face.

Without warning, the Headhunter broke off the chase, banking sharply toward the planet. Its aft engines betrayed haste, glowing with the throttle thrown full open as the fighter vanished into the dense cloud cover above the planet. Suspicious, Ross glared at Brandl, feeling the constriction of fear in his throat. “What’s the catch?”

“You had better prepare yourself,” Brandl whispered.

The proximity alarms blared, sending a deafening echo into the freighter’s corridor and accessways. Exploding with tactical data and imminent warnings of ship-to-ship collision, the sensors closed on the gigantic structure of the massive Imperial Star Destroyer, newly emerged from hyperspace.

As the Star Destroyer moved across the viewscreen only a scant 100 meters from him, Ross slumped against the back of his chair, defeated before one shot could be fired. Slowly, scores of turbolaser batteries turned on them, targeting his freighter. Still hampered by a faulty ion drive, the *Kierra* bucked and lurched toward the Star Destroyer.

“Have they got us?” Ross moaned, massaging his eyes and forehead.

Kierra snickered nervously. “Does Boba Fett enjoy his job?”

“Could we outrun them?”

“We couldn’t even out-think them at this point, flyboy. They’ve got us locked in tight.”

Resting his head and arms against the flight console, Ross sighed, accepting the inevitable. “You’ve managed to sign my death warrant!”

“On the contrary, I’ve guaranteed your reprieve.” The Jedi’s mouth hinted at a sly grin.

“I have a price on my head! An Imperial bounty!”

“You are about to discover that the Emperor is quite generous, especially when one of his citizens sees fit to return his property.”

“You’re one of the Emperor’s freaks?” Ross argued. “What were you doing on Najiba ... You were running!” Staring at the Imperial Star Destroyer, he gasped, “You were running from the Empire? Why?”

“It no longer matters,” Brandl whispered. “The time has come to confront the darkness and forsake it for what it is ... just so many shadows.”

“Well some shadows can kill!”

As they passed into the outer docking field, the freighter was engulfed in darkness. “Then let all be perfected in death.”

Prying the forward deck plate from the flight console, Ross quickly unbuckled his blaster, stashing the belt inside with a hidden cache of thermal detonators and other illegal weaponry. Motivated by Imperial penalties for unauthorized equipment and arms, he retreated to a general utility closet in the corridor beyond the command cabin. Retrieving a small stash of blaster power packs, the flustered Corellian returned to the bridge to find Brandl peering curiously into the hidden compartment. “Kierra, make certain the shield housing is intact. I don’t want them finding your power cell.”

“A girl’s got to have her privacy,” she quipped. “Good thinking, boss.”

Closing the hidden panel, Ross tripped the contamination seal. If the Imperial sensors went over the ship, they would bypass

this area for contaminated mechanic's tools. Abruptly, the interior lights fluctuated as the power levels dropped, shifting to auxiliary mode. "All clear," Ross hollered.

"I've switched over my power couplings to a subordinate cell. Even if they do find my main generator, they won't know what it is. But," she teased, "that means I can't eavesdrop over the comlink or scan the perimeter!"

"For your own safety," Brandl began, "I advise you not to mention Trulalis."

Remembering Brandl's wife and son back on the planet, Ross nodded pensively. "Kierra, sweep all records and logs since we left Najiba, input data from a previous job. Where does that put us?"

"We dropped that baby tris off on Tatooine, remember?"

"Don't remind me," Ross replied wistfully. "Just erase the reasons and submit an addendum about engine trouble above Trulalis."

"Right, boss."

"And Kierra? Lose yourself. They'll probably go over every centimeter of this ship."

"Is that a hint of concern in your voice, flyboy?"

"Yeah," he grumbled. Shrugging the tension menacing his shoulders, he walked through the corridor to the hatch and deactivated the seal.

Before the ramp could fully lower two Imperial stormtroopers charged aboard the ship, leveling their weapons at Ross, shoving him against the hull wall. The force of the blow knocked the wind from his lungs and the Corellian doubled over, coughing desperately to catch his breath. Twenty or more stormtroopers were staggered outside the freighter, their weapons pointing into the ramp lift, trained on the dark Jedi.

Undaunted by the show of Imperial might, Brandl scanned the parade of white-on-black armor, until he met the familiar face of an Imperial officer beyond the periphery of armed soldiers.



Stepping aside, the Jedi allowed three stormtroopers to rush past him into the ship.

"I trust you will cooperate," the officer announced. Pompously, he adjusted the brim of his black cap. "If not for your own sake, then for the sake of your companion."

Disguising a hint of defeatism with dramatic poise, the Jedi proclaimed, "How can I cooperate?"

"Think nothing. Do nothing. Say nothing until you are told."

Offering a hand to the panting smuggler, Brandl grinned slyly, his back to the Imperial entourage. "Captain Grendahl, you'll find that I do nothing very well."

Grendahl's face was menacing. "We're scheduled to rendezvous with the *Interrogator* within the hour. Inquisitor Tremayne is eager to see you again, Lord Brandl ... very eager." Pointing to Ross, Grendahl demanded, "Take him to the isolation area for questioning." Changing his demeanor with obvious fraudulence, Grendahl tipped his hat with mocking respect, "Please, Lord Brandl, your quarters have been prepared."

Massaging the bruises swelling on his chest and arms, Ross leaned his head against the antiseptically clean wall of the holding cell. Several hours had slowly passed, marked with isolated sessions of routine questioning. Abruptly, the door opened, admitting two stormtroopers and Captain Grendahl, who he recognized from the hangar bay. Pleasantly, the Imperial officer sat down across from him, setting a large datapad on the table between them. "Do you recognize this gentleman?" he asked, keying up a picture on the small screen.

Ross laughed softly, recognizing the distinguished curves of his own face. "Would it help if I said I didn't?"

Grendahl smiled generously. "No." Folding his hands against the table top, he sneered, "Interfering with an Imperial investigation is a crime punishable with imprisonment."

“An Imperial investigation?” Ross jeered. “It was a fight, and not a fair one,” he argued. “Two storm-troopers against a Jawa, come on!”

“Never mind the odds,” Grendahl replied evenly. “You still interfered; however ...”

“However?” the Corellian scoffed, mocking the insipid officer.

“However, I am authorized to extend a generous amnesty if you will cooperate and answer a few questions.”

“Amnesty?” Ross chuckled. He scratched his head, agitated. “Imperial amnesty is about as valuable as a Wookiee dwarf with no hair.”

Grendahl frowned, covering his dismay with shrewd professionalism. “You have the Emperor’s guarantee, Captain Ross. Help us with one short investigation and you will be cleared of all charges.”

Stalling, Ross demanded, “He owes me money!”

“I can’t promise you will get it,” Grendahl countered, “but you are entitled to 10,000 credits.” Grinning malevolently, he watched the smuggler’s startled reaction. “That’s 10 percent of the bounty offered for Brandl’s safe return.”

Intrigued, Ross leaned over the edge of the table. “You mean to say Brandl’s worth 100,000 credits?”

Anxious to keep the smuggler’s attention, Grendahl silently acknowledged the query. “You’re lucky to even be alive, Captain Ross. Adalric Brandl is highly unstable, capable of inconceivable atrocities. However, his value to the Emperor makes him an essential resource. Where did you find him?”

“Najiba.”

Grendahl’s face darkened, perplexed. “Najiba has stringent ordinances restricting traffic through the asteroid belt.”

“By the time I got there,” Ross explained, “no one cared about port control penalties. They just wanted him off the planet.”

“Was there trouble? Was anyone harmed?”

The Corellian shrugged casually. “I never left my ship,” he lied, “so I can’t really say.”

“And where were you going?”

“Mos Eisley, but,” Ross laughed, “considering my last visit, I only planned to take him as far as Anchorhead. After that, he was on his own.”

“Did he ever mention his connection with the Emperor?”

“Not until you had us in the tractor beam.”

“The damage to your ship?”

“We were attacked by pirates,” Ross replied rhythmically. “My hyperdrive failed and we just barely managed to arrive here.”

Grendahl hesitated. “You keep accurate ship records, Captain Ross. Your flight log and manifests substantiate your story.”

“Call it a throwback to my bounty hunting days,” Ross offered. “If you wanted your expenses, exact documentation was a necessity.”

Tentatively peering into the room, a junior-grade lieutenant saluted Grendahl, ignoring the prisoner with him. “Captain Grendahl, sir, Admiral Etnam requests your presence on the bridge immediately, sir. Lord Brandl has been given the task of escorting the civilian to his ship.”

“What!”

Ross concealed a sly grin behind the collar of his duster. Feigning surprise, he rose from the chair and leaned against the glossy table, pondering how Brandl managed to arrange this escort.

“Captain Grendahl,” the lieutenant whispered, appalled by the outburst. “Admiral Etnam’s instructions were quite specific. He is anxious to rendezvous with High Inquisitor Tremayne.” Being Etnam’s personal aide and fearing no reprisals from Grendahl, he nodded to the nearest stormtrooper and whispered, “Retrieve the prisoner.”

Grendahl struggled to retain his composure, chafed by Brandl’s influence, which despite his moment of dishonor to the Emperor, still held weight, even with the intrepid character of Admiral Etnam. Nostrils flared, he hissed between grit teeth, “Very well.” Then to reestablish his ego in the company of those

under his command, he straightened his hunched shoulders, erasing the sour scowl from his face. "You're free to go, Captain Ross," he growled. "The Emperor's clemency can be bountiful and far-reaching; but the next time you meddle with an Imperial investigation," he paused, "you may find yourself at the wrong end of Imperial justice." Folding his hands behind his back, Grendahl started up the corridor. "Remember that the next time you consider beating the odds."

Over the polished shoulders of several stormtroopers, Brandl watched Grendahl's retreating back. Sneering behind the Imperial officer, the Jedi sniffed disdainfully as he led the smuggler into the corridor. "Are you a superstitious man, Captain Ross?"

Preoccupied by the armed escort behind them, Ross whispered, "My grandfather used to say that superstition was the foundation of a weak mind."

"Then we are surely doomed, for the basis of our civilization lays in the hands of high priests, shamans, and monks." Brandl laughed with genuine good nature. There was a spark of emotion betrayed by the brilliance of his eyes and Ross noted the deepening of the laugh lines framing his mouth. Adalric Brandl was in good spirit. "Your grandfather was a wise man."

Ross shrugged off the compliment. "Just another smuggler who found himself on the wrong end of Imperial justice." He sniffed, recalling Grendahl's threat. "That's why I became a bounty hunter, hoping to avoid what happened to him."

"And then?"

"And then I got bored. Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"We spend nearly the whole of our lives searching for the appropriate role that will mark the end of our existence with some moment of glory, ignoring the fact that fame and reputation are but mere perfumes of virtue. They never last."

"Is that another line?" Ross teased.

“Acting is a profound education in human nature and that is why I became so obsessed; but as my intellect improved, my morals failed and I became the very thing I most despised.”

“And what was that?”

“Human. I was not a king, not a hero, not a god. Just a man trapped in the passion of the play.”

“So what happens now?” Ross probed.

“My life has been one continuous drama,” Brandl whispered, “a tragic one, I’m afraid. And I have stumbled through it, scene by scene, act by act, like some terrified neophyte. Tonight, Fortune calls for the final exit. I can no longer live the lie.”

“You’re going back to the Emperor, aren’t you? After what he’s done to you?”

“He did nothing but point in a general direction. I chose to go and do his bidding.”

“What about your family? Your boy? What if the Emperor ever found out?”

“I assure you; no harm will befall them.” Euphorically, he sighed, “They will be safe.”

Ross believed him. There was a certainty about the Jedi that went beyond the sinister shadows that had once kept the two men at odds with each other. But the smuggler’s conscience demanded a bit more for security. “How can you be sure?”

“I’ve never been more certain in my life.” Placing a credit chit in the smuggler’s hand, he closed Ross’s fingers over it. Ross noticed another object in Brandl’s hand, one which the Jedi tried to conceal when he folded his hands together over it. “The chit is the remainder of what I owe you and the Emperor’s compulsory fee for capturing a dangerous renegade.” He grinned malevolently, amused by his own sarcasm.

Slipping the chit in his duster pocket, Ross noticed the spherical, metallic shape beneath Brandl’s hands, and noted the raspy acid eraser etched into the explosive where the serial trace markers had been removed. Eyes wild with the revelation, he stared into Brandl’s tranquil face.

“Consider all debts paid,” the Jedi whispered. Turning curtly on his heels, he retreated in the hangar corridor with the escort in tow.

Ross hurried up the ramp, rush sealing the corridor hatch. “Kierra!” he hissed, sprinting through the access tunnel into the flight cabin. “Kierra, wake up!”

“What do you mean wake up!” she snapped. “The engines have been on line and waiting for the last hour. I even managed to knock one of the ion coils in place by popping the shield housing.” She snorted, causing an erratic hiccup over the comm. “What’s the rush? The main databanks were clean and according to this little astromech they had on board—”

“Never mind!” Ross shouted, strapping himself into the acceleration chair. “Brandl has one of my thermal detonators and I think he plans to—”

A muffled explosion reverberated through the docking corridors, blowing smoke and debris into the auxiliary bay. Piercing, high-pitched alarms began to blare, alerting medics and technicians to the area. Amid the chaos of shouting voices, the klaxons, and the sound of armored feet rushing to secure the area, the *Kierra* momentarily hovered above the flight pad. Several smaller explosions echoed from the passage, rattling TIE fighters and shuttle craft in the nearby racks.

Bewildered, Kierra gasped, “What would ever possess him to pull such a stunt?”

“He had to protect his family,” the smuggler replied wearily.

“But with him dead, there’s no guarantee the Empire won’t find them. Then again,” she mused aloud, “there’s no guarantee the Empire will even look for them.” Flustered by the infinite innuendoes, she quipped, “I’m just glad it’s over.”

“But it’s not,” he whispered. Banking sharply over an array of TIE fighters and ejector racks, Ross guided the *Kierra* out of the launch bay, repeatedly throttling the labored engines. “Brandl might have made his final exit; but the play is far from over ... for us ... or his family.” The Corellian grinned nostalgically.

Mesmerized by the verdant face of Trulalis, he watched the planet rotate before him, physically unmarred, innocently unaware, momentarily unchanged. He sighed, his smuggler's sense oddly at peace. There were no more shadows.

Casually resetting the astrogation system for Najiba, he braced himself as the *Kierra* stuttered across the open void and then vanished into the translucent brilliance of hyperspace.

# Missed Chance

## by Michael A. Stackpole

Corran Horn smiled broadly as the R2 droid's muted warble came to him from back in the darkened interior of the temporary hangar. "Yes, Whistler, you have done a good job of disguising this place." In his absence the droid had busied himself by strewing all manner of debris inside the abandoned vehicle shed. Between that and the growth of the purple *djorra* vine across the front of the shed, no one would guess that the structure hid the only X-wing fighter on Garqi.

Corran swung under the ship's sleek nose and squat-walked back to where the little green and white droid stood. Things had been moved around since he'd last visited Whistler and Corran suspected he was only seeing the latest in a long line of decorating schemes. "I'm sorry I haven't visited sooner, but the whole city is going quite insane about Rebel activity. The way everyone is being watchful, you'd think some slicers grafting New Republic slogans and graphics onto computer screens and public data displays was the same as murder."



The droid extended his I/O jack and plugged it into the port on a small datapad resting atop a can oozing an oily gray substance. The screen flicked to life and displayed the blade assembly for an X-wing's centrifugal debris extractor. A chirp ran from low to high as the droid's head swung from the image around to Corran.

The pilot blushed, then shook his head. "No, I haven't figured out how to get the part out of the Imperial Guards' possession. With the Rebel activity around here they've not slackened their security the way they normally would. Finding the spare parts and those proton torpedoes on the *Star's Delight* was the biggest thing to happen to Imps on this backwater, and it got Prefect Barris all hot to root out the Rebels here. I don't know who he thinks that will impress—the Emperor is dead and there's enough infighting on Coruscant that we even get word of it out here."

The droid's whistle scolded Corran as the image of the debris extractor faded into the crest of the New Republic.

"No, it's not a question of joining the Republic or not—and we've gone over this before. There is *no* Rebel activity here. The 'Rebels' they think they have are kids—students at Garqi Ag University. They couldn't help me get those parts away from Imps if I gave them months of instruction. Moreover, they'd get killed in the attempt." Corran shook his head adamantly. "Look, this is my problem. Captain Nootka brought those torpedoes because he thought he could sell them to me, or move them to his Rebel contacts elsewhere. They got him caught, got his crew arrested and his ship impounded. I *might* owe it to him to try to spring him, but doing that without having this ship up and flying is not going to work."

As he spoke, Corran reached up and ran a hand along the side of the X-wing. It shared the green and white color scheme of the droid, though both of them could have used a few paint touch-ups. The fighter had been Corran's during his time with the Corellian Security Force, and Whistler had been his co-pilot and

partner in countless missions to stop smugglers and other troublemakers from disrupting life in the Corellian system.

Whistler let the datapad's screen go dark, producing a mournful tone as he did so.

"I know, Whistler, I miss taking those night flights, too." When Imperial entanglements made remaining in CorSec impossible, he took off with the ship and the droid. His purpose in coming to Garqi had been to lie low and avoid drawing Imperial attention to himself. Despite the fact that flying the X-wing put his life in jeopardy, he could no more refrain from flying than he could refrain from breathing—though he did make all of his flights at night to make it more difficult to locate him and his ship.

*And dodging the local troops was simplicity itself. If I'd not sucked a rdava-bird into the starboard engine on that last flight, I'd still be flying and no one would think Garqi was a hotbed of Rebel activity.* He sighed. "Now I'm stuck here because rich kids who have decided they want to shock their parents have started playing Rebel. It's all a game to them."

Again the droid scolded him with a sharp whistle.

"You're right, Dynba Tesc probably doesn't think of it as a game, but it's her own fault that she got caught last night. The Imps around here are not exactly storm-trooper caliber, but she left a trail that even our old CorSec Imperial Liaison officer could have followed." He reached out and patted the droid gently on the head. "She'll spend some time in the local jail, then get kicked loose. Yes, she'll be interrogated, but they'll see she knows nothing and let her go. I'm sure of it."

Whistler tooted another question.

"Yes, if she were in danger, I would do what I could—but not because she's a Rebel. I've got nothing to do with the New Republic and just because the Empire hates the both of us doesn't mean we're allies."

Corran frowned heavily. "The Rebels might have killed the Emperor, and they're saying they have the last living Jedi on their

side, but they're still a far cry from having the Empire down and out. My priority is to lay low while they attract more attention than I do. The Rebellion, such as it is, has come to Garqi, and that means it's time we're out of here."

He held a hand up. "No, no more protests. In fact, I don't want to hear any more Rebellion squawk out of you, got it? I'll be spending all my time working to maintain my cover *and* to keep my eye on the extractor. I'll figure out a way to get it, then we're on our way."

Corran started to turn away, but the droid caught hold of his sleeve with his pincer attachment. "What is it, Whistler?"

The droid hooted derisively at him.

"Yeah, well maybe back on the job I wouldn't have been so blase about Dynba Tesc's problem, but now we're running from the law, not working for the law." He pulled his arm free, but looked back at the droid and hung his head. "Okay, no promises, but I will see what I can do. I look to take care of us first, though, right?"

Whistler's head spun around as he crowed triumphantly.

"Yes, saving her and her friends would look good in my datafile." Corran nodded to the droid as he headed back out of the hangar. *Unless the Empire is the one to put the notation in it, but they'd have to catch me first. With that extractor, I can avoid them—and that is the notation in my datafile I most want to see.*

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Prefect Mosh Barris sat back in the overstuffed chair that he decided was almost as deep and as black as the depression in which he found himself. He felt old and tired, as if he were at a point in the universe from which any other direction was *up*. The only thing Garqi had to recommend it as a post had been its utter isolation and insulation from the Empire, and even that shield had worn thin in his year's tenure as the military prefect under the current—and seemingly ever-absent—Imperial governor.

"You see, Eamon," he began, "I had not expected her to make it easy for us, but this Tesc woman's ability to resist narco-interrogation is incredible. She steadfastly claims she knows nothing of the Rebellion and claims no connection with Lai Nootka or his *Star's Delight*. Even so, she seems to have an encyclopedic understanding of the phantom X-wing's flights—which she claims is because studying it was a hobby for her—and full knowledge of her crime. Of this 'Xeno' she claims is the ringleader of her slicer circus we have no record, and her speculation that he is a member of the *Delight's* crew that eluded capture is one more black mark against us."

Eamon Yzalli nodded slightly as he slid the silver tray with the refilled snifter of Cassandran choholl. "Regrettable, sir. On the whole, one could be led to believe by all this that she knows nothing beyond what she has already revealed."

Barris took the glass and warmed it in his hands for a moment. "Looks can be deceiving, Eamon. Looking at her I see a woman who is more a child than adult—but that is standard among the adults here. This damned world is so fertile that the great agri-combines need nothing more than droids to tend the crops and accountants to tend the profits. The people of Garqi are pampered and unrealistic, hardly fodder for the Rebellion."

He drank in just enough of the Cassandran liquor to fill the hollow of his tongue, and let it pool there for as long as it took for the fragrant, fruity vapors to fill his sinuses. "Of course, *that* is what she wants us to believe."

"What is, sir?"

"That she is too innocent to be part of the Rebellion." Barris looked up at his green-eyed aide. "I cannot and will not be tricked by her. A long time ago I did nothing in a situation that called for action. I was deceived and I have paid for it since. It was a long time ago ... but I have told you of it before, yes?"

The blond man returned to the sideboard and replaced the tray before turning and nodding to his master. "I do recall having been told something of the *alien* incident, sir."

“Yes, the *alien* incident.” Barris stared darkly into the depths of the amber liquor. An alien—both humanoid and intelligent—had run him and his men around in circles on a planet that was—if it were possible—even more of a backwater than Garqi. This alien had killed his men, had brought down a TIE fighter and had even slain two stormtroopers using technology he stole from the Imperials in combination with native plants and animals. *I advocated a planetary bombardment to rid us of this menace, but Captain Parck invited this murderous creature to join the Empire. The Emperor chose that time to forego his normal xenophobia. He advanced Parck’s career, gave this Thrawn a career, and started me on the long road from one humiliating post to another.*

Barris had hoped the Emperor’s hatred for him would die with the man, but the Imperial institutional memory seemed to cherish the idea of taking him lower and lower. The man who had ousted Barris from his last post had been disciplined for having allowed the last Jedi Knight to escape Tatooine and murder the Emperor. That man’s punishment had pushed Barris even further from the Galactic Core to the mottled red and purple world that was Garqi.

“I swore, Eamon, I swore that I would never let an opportunity to act decisively and forcefully slip away without redeeming myself. Uncovering and smashing the Rebels here on Garqi would allow me to do that.”

“If I may be permitted, sir, you have an abundance of time in which to learn from Dynba Tesc what you need to accomplish this end. You have only had her for two days. She will break.”

Barris tossed back the choholl and gritted his teeth against the fiery feeling it ignited in his throat and gut. “Would that what you say was true. I just received a priority message via a courier droid that indicated Kirtan Loor, an Intelligence agent, is being sent here by Coruscant to investigate. He will brief me on his arrival as to what his mission is, but we both know he is coming here to investigate *me*. He will find me deficient in some way and I will

be sent to some other world that is even more wretched than this.”

“I understand your alarm, sir.”

“I think you do, Eamon, for we are alike, aren’t we?”

“How so, sir?”

“We are both unhomed. I am hounded from post to post, with no claim to any world. You, on the other hand, are an Alderaanian, and without a world to call your own.”

Eamon stiffened a moment, then nodded. “As you say, sir, neither of us has a home.”

Barris’ eyes sharpened for a moment. “I have a question I have to ask you, and I intend no disrespect. I’ve often thought of it, but I have said nothing because you have been so valuable to me. Had my predecessor not left you behind, and had you not made my arrival here so easy, I should have despaired of making any headway. Now that I will probably be gone from here soon, I think I have little to risk in asking it.”

“Sir?”

“The Empire destroyed your world. How is it that you are content laboring for the servants of the Empire?”

Eamon’s head came up and his hands disappeared at the small of his back. “Sir, Alderaan was a peaceful world. We were unarmed and our people believed in pacifism. Our leaders chose to rebel. I, and I was not alone, revered order as much as I revered peace and left the planet. As this Rebellion robbed my people of peace, it also robbed them of life. Even so, I am at peace *and* I still revere order. You, my lord, represent order on this world, therefore I am content and honored to be in your service.”

“Well said, Eamon. I understand your feelings completely.” Barris sat forward and rested his hands on the edge of his black lacquered desk. “The time has come for me to take action. To the Empire, failure to do *something* is seen as inability to do *anything*. I cannot afford that, not with Loor on his way. Though reminiscent of what the Death Star did to your world, I find

myself forced to make an example of Dynba Tesc and publicly execute her. Once I do that her companions will scatter in terror. They will know I would have only killed her if she was of no more use to me, which means she gave me their names. We will learn who they are when they flee.”

The military prefect smiled coldly. “Let Coruscant deny *that* is decisive action!”

“Indeed, sir, it is decisive, however ...” Standing over by the sideboard, Eamon looked somewhat perplexed.

Barris reined his smile back in. Eamon Yzalli’s perspective on Garqi had often proven useful and, not a few times, had steered Barris away from various *faux pas* that would have made his tenure more difficult. “You have an idea?”

“I do, sir, but only because of the question you asked before. It strikes me that if the local Rebels do have a way to defeat narco-interrogation—as the lack of success with Miss Tesc indicates—they may be sophisticated enough to wait out your action. More importantly, sir, I think it would be preferential to draw her confederates together, instead of scattering them, as making a martyr out of her would certainly do.”

“Yes, I see that, but how, Eamon?”

“Make your declaration about her execution public, my lord. Schedule it for a week from now. This will agitate the Rebels. I will visit her covertly and tell her that I cannot abide seeing her die. I will arrange for her escape.”

Barris’ black brows collided in the depths of his frown. “You work for me. She will not believe you.”

“But she will, sir, for even the most cynical of the Rebels would believe that I, an Alderaanian, have had a change of heart and wish to make amends for not acting against the Empire sooner. In addition, as they say, sir, actions will speak louder than words. I will arrange for her escape and prepare the way for her and her confederates to free the crew of the *Star’s Delight*. We will even return to them their cargo of X-wing parts and munitions. The Rebels will all get together in the ship and prepare to leave.

Your four TIEs will go after them and end the Rebel threat to Garqi in one dramatic fireball.”

The military prefect tipped his snifter up and let the last drop of the choholl drip into his tongue as he considered the plan. “Are you sure my pilots can bring the ship down?”

“They will be able to if we render the shield generator inoperable.” The ghost of a smile drifted across Eamon’s bearded face as he started to pour more liquor into the empty glass.

“We will disable their blaster cannon, too.”

“No, sir.”

“No?”

“They need to be operable to provide verisimilitude, sir.” Eamon inserted the cut-crystal stopper in the decanter. “If one of your TIEs were shot down, its loss would prove the danger the fleeing Rebels represented to Garqi. Of course, the fact that the Rebels were running away *and* were destroyed will be a lesson here to any who would seek to emulate them.”

“I see.” Barris admired the way the light shifted and glowed within the choholl. “Then should we not keep the X-wing munitions to prove the *Star’s Delight* was smuggling things in the first place, or is this more verisimilitude?”

“We have the initial scans to show the smuggling, sir, and piecing together debris from the destroyed freighter will give this Loor character a great deal to do, occupying his time fully.” Eamon smiled weakly. “Finally, sir, I will use delivery of the contraband to secure my passage aboard the ship. This way I will know when it is to leave, so our fighters can be prepared to sweep it from the sky.”

“But you will not be on it?”

“No, sir. You will plant a report in our computer system here for one of their codeslicers to ferret out. It will indicate you had me executed for crimes against the Empire—unspecified, of course, but they will take it to mean I was found out. They will



leave the moment that message is accessed, so they will tell us when they are leaving.”

“And I alert our fighters to go.”

“Exactly, sir.” Eamon’s face darkened for a moment. “The only difficulty with all this is that we cannot have any trace of what we are doing entered into our computer system here.”

“Yes.” Barris nodded solemnly and sipped the choholl. “Since their slicers can put stuff into our databases, we know they can pull it out again. Were they to find any indication of our operation, all would be lost.”

“Precisely, sir. I shall make the arrangements, sir, if you have no objections.”

“Objections? No. I will want reports, however.”

“Of course, my lord.” Eamon smiled briefly. “For your ears only, until it is time to reveal what you have accomplished in service to the Empire.”

Dynba Tesc felt cold and achy, or at least she thought she did. Curled up on the steel cot, with her back pressed against the rough stones of the cell wall, she knew she should feel uncomfortable. Her body definitely was giving her all the sensory input to tell her she was, in fact, not feeling very good at all.

*The problem is that with all the stuff they’ve pumped into me to pump information out of me, I’m not certain what I know and what I don’t know, what is real and unreal.* She coiled a blond lock around her right index finger, then sucked on the ends of the hair. A sense of security washed over her briefly, then she angrily flicked the hair away. *I am not a child, I can’t retreat into childhood things to find comfort.*

But retreat she really did want to do, because she had never been more scared in her whole entire life. There was no question in her mind about that—clear of drugs or dosed to the top of her cranium. The terror of being arrested and tossed into jail had been enough to make her tell the authorities everything she knew.

The problem was she didn't know anything.

To her the Rebellion had been a distant conflict, one full of romance and heroism. The last True Jedi fighting the monster that destroyed his predecessors and a rogue of a smuggler winning the heart of a princess from a dead world—these were the things she knew about the New Republic. They had destroyed the Death Stars and the Emperor, but other than a change of the military prefect, those events had no effect on her or her friends at the university.

Then the *Star's Delight* had come to Garqi and had been taken for smuggling supplies to Rebels. She and others she met on the computer comnets—in temporary areas they sliced open and let close after the conversations were done—had mentioned suspicions that the New Republic had agents on Garqi. Dynba had found that prospect thrilling and not a little scary. People speculated about all sorts of things concerning the *Delight*, and a natural linkage was made between it and the phantom X-wing that had been reported flying at night all over Garqi.

Then she met Xeno. He sliced his way into one of the covert conversations—marking him as being better at codeslicing than anyone in the Imperial Security outfit on Garqi. Though he never said it, from his name and the fact that he only showed up after the *Delight's* capture, Dynba concluded he was one of the *Delight's* crew that the local authorities had failed to pick up.

Xeno organized her and her byte-friends, keeping them all anonymous. She never knew what she'd find on her datapad once she linked into the planetary network, but it was always an adventure. Xeno showed her and the others how to graft slogans and graphics into the system, so datapad screens everywhere in the comnet would get New Republic messages at random intervals.

The shock and the outrage, as voiced by her parents and their friends, was wonderful. Dynba had struggled numerous times to maintain a straight face when some *atrocitiy* was being described to her by her apoplectic father, all the while knowing she'd

composed the slogan and aimed it to hit his computer first. Doing things like that marked the highest point in her personal rebellion against his authority, and she found planning and executing new code assaults rather cathartic.

Dynba had long held the opinion that Xeno was grooming her and the others for something bigger—possibly the liberation of the *Delight* even—but she wanted to do something more. Abandoning the virtual realm of computers, she went out and bought a can of paint. In big, sloppy red letters she wrote “The death of a Tyrant is the triumph of Justice!” on the side of the Imperial Court building in the heart of the capital, Pesktda.

It had not occurred to her until later—about the time the local constabulary was putting her in binders—that having the store mix up a precise shade of red and charging the purchase to her personal account was not exactly the way to maintain her anonymity. The constabulary seemed to think her boldness meant she was dangerous and the interrogation to which she was subjected had been ruthless and efficient. Her lack of substantive answers angered her questioners and she knew she was in very serious trouble.

The door to her cell hissed open and the lights came up slowly. A small man with blond hair and beard entered and descended the metal-lattice steps to the floor. He turned back and gestured toward an unseen guard. The door clanked down, leaving her alone with this man wearing the uniform of the prefect’s personal staff. She thought she recognized him, but she could attach no name to his face.

Dynba drew her legs up and tried to wedge herself more deeply into the corner of the cell. “I don’t know any more.”

The man nodded. “I know, child.” He sank down in a squat, bringing his eye level down to hers. “It is my sad duty to tell you that Prefect Barris has decided to have you executed for your crime.”

“What?” Dynba gulped air. “He can’t.”

“Oh, but he can.” The man’s green-eyed gaze flicked down toward the floor, giving her a moment to recover herself, then he looked back up. “I, on the other hand, cannot stand by and let this happen.”

“What are you saying?” She thought she heard sincerity in his voice, and read it in his eyes, but the clothes he wore and the fact that a guard had followed his direction argued against any compassion on his part. The fact that he was there and talking to her at all made her wary of a trick. “You work for him. You won’t help me.”

The man broke off his stare and color rose to his cheeks. “Please, this is difficult for me as it is.”

“Were I not here I might be more considerate. You work for a monster.”

“I know.” His hands balled into fists. “I am his personal aide.”

“You! You are Eamon Yzalli!”

“I am.”

“Then you are here to trick me.” Dynba let her anger flow fully into her voice. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Eamon sighed loudly. “I am.”

“What?”

“I am ashamed.” He swallowed hard. “I should have seen sooner that to which I have chosen to be blind—the Empire corrupts people. I denied this truth and my denial is a crime that makes me complicit in the death of my homeworld, Alderaan. I came here and served here in hopes of forgetting. Then, when Prefect Barris was installed, I made myself a buffer between his capriciousness and the people of Garqi. Even now I tried to get him to moderate your punishment, but to no avail. I cannot allow your death to be upon my head, so I have chosen to act against him and for you.”

Dynba shook her head to clear her brain of the buoyant hope bubbling up into it. “What can you do?”

A broad smile split Eamon's beard and in that moment Dynba thought him just a little bit handsome. *Like a hero of the New Republic.*

"What I can do and will do is this: I will arrange for your liberation. You will have approximately two days in which to execute a rescue of the *Star's Delight* crew. You and your confederates will board the ship and leave with it. Garqi is no longer safe for you."

His eyes narrowed. "Captain Nootka will need things to trade if he is going to resupply the ship and get to the New Republic. I will arrange for the contraband he smuggled here to be placed aboard—I can tell the workers we want the evidence replaced in the compartments to show an Imperial Intelligence agent how we found it. They will believe that and it will save us having to move it ourselves."

Dynba's blue eyes widened. "You're coming with us?"

Eamon nodded solemnly. "I can cover *your* escape, but once the ship gets away there would be no concealing my part in all of this. When you are set to go, have one of your slicers get into the Imperial comnet and leave me a message as to where and when I should meet you."

"I'll do it myself." Dynba swung her legs over the edge of the cot and her toes touched the cold floor. "What you're doing, the people you lost on Alderaan would be proud."

Eamon closed his eyes and nodded. "It is my hope you are correct." He reached out and took her hand in his, gently stroking warmth back into her flesh. "You only have to endure this prison for a few hours more, then you shall be free."

She gripped his hand tightly. "And soon after that, *we* shall be free!"

Barris raised a nearly empty glass in Eamon's direction. "I salute you, Eamon. It seems as if everything is going perfectly."

“Yes, sir. Dynba Tesc is secreted away, bringing her confederates together to free the *Delight* and its crew. She is also altering her appearance so she can claim to be Kirtana Loor, Imperial Intelligence agent, and take the *Delight*’s crew from custody without having to notify you for authorization. Several landspeeders have been organized for transport.”

“And the *Delight* is ready?”

The small man nodded solemnly. “Using TIE pilots as workers was difficult, but once I explained the necessity of limiting knowledge of the operation to them, they agreed they were the best people for doing the job. The X-wing munitions are on board the *Delight*, though the spare parts appear to have been pilfered. As a skilled technician can convert them to work in Incom’s T-47 landspeeder, my assumption is that someone in property storage gave himself a bonus. I have a few leads in that regard.”

“We will deal with him, later.” Barris snorted, drank and set his glass down. “The shields on the ship are disabled?”

“Yes, sir. We replaced a duplex circuit with its triplex equivalent.”

“But a codepatch will allow them to bring the shields Up.”

“Yes, sir, but an initial diagnostic run on the ship will report the circuits as complete. Only when they discover the failure will they begin to look for the triplex. At that point slicing the proper sequence out of it will take approximately an hour.”

The Prefect tapped a finger against the empty rim of his snifter. “An hour they will not have.”

“Precisely, sir.” Eamon refilled the glass with choholl.

“While you have been busy, Eamon, so have I.” Barris winked at his man. “I have composed the report about your execution.”

“Not on the system, sir?”

Barris smiled in response to the urgency in Eamon’s voice. “No, of course not.” He tapped the fingers of his right hand against the side of his white-haired head. “I have it all up here. You were terminated for ‘anti-Imperial activity.’”

“Very good, sir.”

“I may modify it. I want it to be perfect.”

“I am certain it will be more than suitable, sir.”

“I thought I would enter it into the computer just around sunset tomorrow. Things should be ready by then?”

“Yes, sir. Agent Loor will be arriving then, so he should see the pursuit and how you handle it.”

“Excellent.” Barris hefted the glass and raised it again in a salute. “The destruction of the *Delight* should make for great entertainment. I think I will have some friends in to watch.”

Eamon nodded solemnly. “Very good, sir. I had already requested the kitchen prepare suitable refreshments for a gathering of ten. Will that be sufficient, sir?”

“Quite, Eamon.” Barris sipped his choholl and smiled. “You anticipate my desires as well as my needs. What would I do without you?”

“A hypothetical question, sir.” Eamon’s expression became placid. “One hopes there is never need to answer it.”

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Her now-brown hair pulled back into a tight bun at the back of her head, Dynba stepped from the first landspeeder and tugged at the hem of her uniform jacket. She marched crisply to the door of the local detention center and drew from the jacket’s breast pocket what looked to be an ordinary rank cylinder. She touched it against the I/O port beside the door.

Somehow, above the thundering of her heart, she heard a click and the door withdrew upward. At the other end of the short corridor she saw a guard standing behind a transparisteel shield look at her, then at the image on the screen of his datapad and back again. As he did so the blood drained from the man’s face.

His clear anxiety gave Dynba a chance to conquer her own fear. Eamon had assured her that the rank cylinder he had given her would identify her as an Imperial Intelligence agent sent out

from Coruscant to inspect Garqi. It made her Kirtana Loor and made her answerable to no one on the planet. A word from her and anyone could be sent to Kessel to mine spice while awaiting interrogation. "You will be someone they fear as much as you fear them. Use it and you will dominate them," he had told her.

*And use it I shall.* Keeping her steps crisp, and relishing the click of leather on stone, she approached the guard. "Are the prisoners ready for transfer?" She let the lilt of the common Core-dweller accent enter her voice, and underscored her words with impatient indignation.

The man's lower lip started quivering. "Transfer? I know nothing of ..."

"Of course you don't." She drew her black leather gloves off by tugging on each finger in succession, then slapped them against the palm of her left hand. "The inefficiency of Rim-world officials should not surprise me, should it?"

"Well, I ..."

"*You* were not going to venture an *opinion*, were you? What is your name?"

The man smiled weakly. "Which prisoners were those, my lady?"

"The crew of the *Star's Delight*." Her eyes became slits and she forced her nostrils to flare. "Returning them to the scene of the crime—you *do* know about using that investigative technique, don't you?"

The man furiously punched keys on his datapad. "Well, I ..."

"Of course you don't—the technique predates the Emperor's murder by a year, so it hasn't gotten out here yet. You probably think he is still alive."

"Yes, my lady, I mean, no ..."

Dynba barked a harsh laugh. "You don't know what you mean. Why the Rebels would strike at this witspare compost heap, I do not know."

"No, my lady."



The door to her right buzzed and slid into the ceiling. Three bedraggled figures, a small female Sullustan, a morose giant of a Duros and a Devaronian with several missing teeth and a broken horn shuffled through the doorway. They wore binders on their wrists and had another pair hobbling them. Each individual looked away from the dying sunlight pouring through the open doorway to the street.

Dynba looked up at the Duros. “Captain Lai Nootka, you and your crew are charged with treason. I am a representative of Imperial Intelligence and the resolution of your case is in my hands. Come with me.”

She led the prisoners from the detention center and waved the landspeeders forward. Each prisoner was secured in a different speeder, then they headed off toward the hangar where the *Star's Delight* had been kept in impound.

The vehicles followed one after the other all the way to the spaceport. Dynba regretted not being able to tell the crew they were safe and with friends, but doing so would have put the mission in jeopardy. If the crew did not look scared and defeated as they rode through the streets of Pesktda, someone could note their happy demeanor and that would attract attention to them and the operation. Eamon had pointed out that people tended not to pay too much attention to those who appear to be doomed because they might attract attention in doing so. Even before he'd said anything, she'd known that was true.

In keeping with her role as Loor, she met the gazes of the curious and held them until the others turned away. *I don't like making people afraid, but it is the only way to save these people and Eamon. And myself and my friends, too.* She kept her stare hard and terrifying throughout the ride until the speeders slid into the shade of the hangar.

The second her landspeeder stopped, she loosened her hair and shook it out over her shoulders. “Open the binders.” She pointed at Nootka. “The ship is ready to go, complete with your X-wing munitions. Start pre-flight. The only thing on this world

that can stop us from getting out of here are four TIE star fighters. Is that a problem?"

The Duros rubbed at his wrists as his driver tinkered with the binders on the starpilot's ankles. "We are matched for speed. We have hyperdrive, they do not. We have a blaster cannon, they have lasers. We have shields, they do not. I think we are not far from freedom."

"Dynba, you did it!" A Twi'lek woman came running down the gangplank of the long Corellian Space Gymsnor-3 Freighter. With her head tails twitching excitedly, she brandished her datapad. "No alarms, no traces. We're clear."

"Good." Dynba looked past Arali Dil's shoulder, then frowned. "Are Eamon or Xeno here?"

Arali shook her head. "No one has been here except Sihha and me."

Dynba frowned. Prior to departing for the prison, Dynba had left a message with Eamon telling him when they planned to leave, and another to Xeno inviting him to reunite with his crew and escape. She had expected both of them to be present when she returned and she had especially wanted to see the look on Eamon's face when he realized his plan had worked perfectly.

"Arali, link into the comnet and see if you have anything from Xeno or Eamon."

"Right."

The Twi'lek and a Bothan had turned out to be the only non-Humans in Xeno's circle. The circle itself only had seven members, not counting Xeno, and all of them had thought it funny that even being so few in number, they had caused enough trouble for the Empire to send an Intelligence agent out from the Core to Garqi to deal with them.

Dynba had briefed everyone on their role in the Great Evacuation. Because of the Empire's xenophobic bias, neither Arali nor Sihha, the Bothan, would pass for Imperial officers, so they had remained with the ship while the five Humans used the

speeders to get the prisoners. Now back in the hangar, everyone hurried aboard the *Delight* and prepared for departure.

“Interesting.”

Dynba glanced away from the hangar opening and toward Arali. “What is?”

“Message to all of us from Xeno. He says his work here isn’t done. He’ll catch up with us later and we will all laugh about this.”

“I’d prefer it if he came with us. I hope they don’t need him to run the ship.”

“Sihha can fill in—he was an astrogation student here.”

“Right.” Dynba felt a heavy darkness begin to spread from her stomach out to her limbs and stab straight up into her heart. “Nothing from Eamon.”

“By the foul hearts of the Sith!”

Dynba whirled at the sound of Arali’s voice. “What?”

The Twi’lek held her datapad out and Dynba snatched it from her trembling hands. “By order of Prefect Mosh Barris, at the conclusion and in resolution of his personal investigation into the actions of Eamon Yzalli, ordered and carried out the discreation of an enemy of the state.” Her voice dropped to a whisper as she read. “He’s dead.”

The datapad slipped from her hands, but the Twi’lek deftly caught it, then started pulling on Dynba’s arm. “Come on, we have to go.”

Dynba pointed back toward the doorway. “Maybe it’s a trick.”

“The Empire doesn’t play jokes, Dynba. Eamon’s dead.” Arali pulled her friend up the gangplank. “Let’s get out of here. We’ll mourn Eamon on the trip, then when we get to the New Republic, we’ll find a way to get even with the Empire.”

Barris felt the comlink clipped to his belt vibrate like the warning scales on a Gorgarian buzzadder. He opened his arms to take in the whole of the crowd in his reception room, then pointed them

toward the eastern balcony. "My friends, I have just been informed that the Rebels have taken the bait in the trap that had been set for them. If you will join me outside, I think you will find their end a spectacular disaster."

Pulling the comlink from his belt, he thumbed it on. "Garqi Eagles, you are clear to intercept and destroy your target."

Arali got Dynba into one of the jumpseats in the cockpit and strapped her in. "Barris got our last passenger, Captain. *You* better move now."

The Duros nodded to his mouse-eared pilot. The Sullustan chittered her way through a checklist. The low hum of the repulsorlift drives filled the ship, then a gentle tremble ran through it as the sublight drives began to push it forward, up and out of the hangar. The nose of the ship came around to the east, facing the ship away from the sun and on a course that meant they would be moving away from the star's mass as they left the planet. That would permit them to enter hyperspace faster, and everyone on the ship knew speed was a virtue when escape was the object of the exercise.

Through the forward viewport Dynba got a spectacular look at the lights of Pesktda. She found the city where she grew up quaint and even beautiful, with lights winking on and off as gentle breezes stirred the dark, leafy canopy that covered everything. Part of her felt the loss of leaving the place of her birth, but that regret was nothing compared to the pain she felt over Eamon's murder.

The *Star's Delight* picked up speed and shot out of the spaceport. The Sullustan pilot kept the ship at a steady angle of ascent. As they broke above the shadow of the world, sunlight lit the sky. It passed quickly as the atmosphere thinned, then the stars above stopped shimmering and just hung there like distant jeweled sparks on the inside of a vast black bowl.

Captain Nootka hunched forward over a screen. "We have four starfighters in our wake. Shields to full in the aft arc."

The Sullustan hit a button on the console, but it remained dark. She hit it again, then shrieked.

Nootka reached over and hit the button himself. "Saricia, we have no shields."

"Invert and give me a shot." The Devaronian's bass voice came from above the companionway that led into the cockpit. Dynba looked back and saw an open hatchway that allowed access beyond the passage's ceiling.

Arali tightened down her restraining straps. "The blaster cannon turret is up top. We have to invert for him to shoot at targets coming from behind and below, otherwise he'll hit the cargo pods."

"Not a good design, is it?"

Nootka turned around and gave Dynba a hard stare. "This is a freighter, not a warship. Saricia is good."

"How good? Good enough to stop them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

The Duros shook his head. "If I am wrong, I will not live long in regret." He hit some more switches on the console. "You said the ship was in working order."

"That's what I was told. Eamon said ..." Dynba's jaw dropped open. "He's not here."

The tips of the Twi'lek's head tails shook with a start. "We were set up, Dynba, set up to die by Eamon Yzalli." She flashed sharp peg-teeth. "I hope part of Xeno's work on Garqi is killing him."

Nootka glanced at his screen, then shook his head. "I would have hoped the situation would not get worse. We have a fifth ship closing fast." The ship shook violently and sparks shot through the companionway, while the thrummed rumble of Saricia's return-fire filled the cockpit. "Our armor will hold them back for a little while, but not long."

“Can we make the jump to lightspeed?”

“In the time we have left?” Nootka asked. “Not even if I knew where we were going and had the course already plotted into the nav computer. It looks now that where we are going is to the grave.”

Corran Horn eased the X-wing’s throttle forward and his speed started to climb faster as he left Garqi’s atmosphere. “You should have told me sooner, Whistler, that’s all I’m saying. It doesn’t matter now, though. We can talk about it later. Now we have to get those TIEs.”

The droid replied in a muted whistle that Corran found almost as depressing as the four-to-one odds on the fight. *Not how I wanted to do this, but I have no choice.*

Corran hit the thumb-switch on the X-wing’s stick. The proton torpedo targeting system came up and painted a big yellow box around the slowest of the TIE starfighters. “That’s target one. Give me the next closest one and mark it as target two.”

Whistler complied instantly, then keened a question.

“Yes, if they’re in range, get me comlink contact.” Corran heard the hiss of static from the speakers in his helmet, then a clear channel opened up. “*Star’s Delight*, the key-code for your shields is 349XER34, repeat 349XER34.”

“Who is this?”

“Someone who just gave you your shields back. Eamon Yzalli sold you out. He’s dead. What he *knew*, I *know*.”

In the background he heard a voice excitedly shout, “It’s Xenol!” The deeper voice, the one he decided belonged to Lai Nootka, overrode the shout. “349XER34 is the code.”

“Exactly.” Corran smiled. “Tell your gunner not to shoot the X-wing and I’ll make his life easier. X-wing out.”

Whistler tooted triumphantly.

“Not yet, buddy, not yet. Give me target one and lighten my acceleration compensator. I want to feel it when I move around.” Nudging the stick over and back, he settled the box around the lagging TIE. The droid beeped intermittently as he tried to get a target lock. The target box went from yellow to red at the same moment Whistler’s tone went solid and Corran hit the trigger.

The proton torpedo shot away from the X-wing and curved only slightly to port before it slammed into the TIE’s ball-cockpit. The explosion shattered the star-fighter’s hexagonal solar panels. It sent their shards spinning away from the roiling, red-gold plasma ball spreading out from where the cockpit had once been.

“Acquire two.”

Brief beeps melded into an uninterrupted tone as Corran hit a pedal and the etheric rudder brought the X-wing’s nose around to port. He hit the trigger again and saw a proton torpedo burn into and through the second TIE. The torpedo hit it solidly on one of the solar panels and blasted through. The projectile glanced down, crushing the fighter’s ion engine exhaust port and clipped the far side solar panel before exploding. The TIE whirled off on a wobbly course before exhaust pressure from the engines tore the ship apart from the inside.

“Two down.” Corran flipped his weapons control over to laser fire and linked the lasers for dual-fire. “Whistler, even out the shields.”

The droid complied with the order as Corran brought the X-wing up in a quarter snap-roll. The maneuver stood the fighter on its port stabilizer foils. Tugging back on the stick, he brought the nose up and cruised onto the tail of one of the two remaining TIEs. It had broken left while its wing man had gone right—a strategy that was usually discouraged and went a long way toward confirming Corran’s opinion of the Garqi garrison.

Whistler’s excited hooting made Corran look up at his rear sensor monitor. *Coming in behind me. Not as bad as I thought.* “I see

him, Whistler. Now you know why I didn't want to fight them at all."

The TIE in front of him began a slow loop to starboard. The move was slow enough that Corran was tempted to follow and light the ship up, but he knew giving in to temptation would have a price. *In this case it will be the TIE back there shortening the loop and melting my ship's tail. Not for me.*

Corran chopped his thrust back and pulled the stick to his breastbone. He looped the X-wing, then punched the throttle full forward and rolled out to port. That dropped him in on an attack vector to the TIE that had been following him. Tightening up on the trigger, he tracked ruby laser bolts across one solar panel, through the cockpit and into the other solar panel.

The TIE didn't explode. It rolled slowly to port, little blue tendrils of energy playing over its myriad surfaces. The X-wing overshot the ship, so Corran rolled and dove down through a loop to keep an eye on it. The TIE did not react and just continued spiraling along on its previous course, bound for a fiery collision with Garqi's atmosphere.

*Pilot's gone, ship's running on momentum.* Corran shivered, imagining for one second what it was like to spend your last seconds of life in pain, in a breached cockpit with all the atmosphere leaking out while cold poured in. *Not the way I want to go.*

Whistler's indignant yowl and the hiss of laser fire splashing against his aft shields shocked Corran. He immediately hit the right rudder pedal, whipping the X-wing's tail to port and out of the line of fire. Pushing the stick hard left, he rolled out to port, then pulled back and brought the ship's nose up and around in a loop. Halfway through that he rolled right and dove, but his sensors showed the TIE was still with him.

*Why are the best guys always the last?* Corran smiled at his own question. "Because the pilots who are bad die first. They were all probably daydreaming just like you." He sideslipped the X-wing to the right and the TIE followed him.



“Whistler, get me the *Delight* again.”

“Nootka here, X-wing.”

“Captain, this guy on me is good. Kill your shields and tell your gunner to shoot high.”

“We just got our shields back.”

“I know. Kill your shields.”

“I do not understand.”

“You will.”

Corran rolled the fighter out to port, then kept a light hand on the stick. Nudging it left and right, up and back, he made the X-wing dance almost unpredictably. After every third or fourth move, when the ship had drifted to port, he'd push the stick down, then up right and right again. He'd level out and fly straight for a couple of seconds, then after that the random pattern would begin again.

When he saw the TIE begin to anticipate his pattern, Corran pulled the X-wing back through a big loop and dove straight in on an intercept course for the *Delight*. “Full shields aft, Whistler.” Corran dipped and jerked the fighter through its pattern. Laser fire came in from the *Delight*, passing over his ship, but only by a margin of decimeters.

The TIE kept to Corran's tail as the X-wing turned and swooped down into a run that took it from bow to stern on the *Delight*. The TIE came in tight and sank below the level of the ship's fire. *He's low enough to strike sparks! This Imp's very good.* Corran smiled. *I gotta hope I'm better.*

As Corran's pattern ended, the X-wing drifted into a gentle glide along the *Delight's* spine. The TIE dropped in behind him and lined up for a shot. The first laser blasts hit the X-wing's aft shield and rocked Corran in the cockpit. *Now or never!*

Corran killed his thrust and cut his repulsorlift drives in at full strength. Acceleration jammed him down in the cockpit couch as the X-wing bounced up and away from the freighter's mass. The TIE starfighter shot through beneath the X-wing, pulling up abruptly to miss the freighter's engine cowlings.

Punching the throttle forward and killing the lift drives, Corran sailed in on the TIE's aft. His targeting box went green. He pulled the trigger and filled the last TIE with laser fire.

The scarlet energy darts shredded the ship, puncturing the cockpit and melting their way through the twin ion engines. The TIE exploded brilliantly. The glittering plasma sphere burned like a star going nova, then imploded, leaving the void in its wake.

"X-wing, this is *Delight*. May we put our shields back up?"

"Affirmative, *Delight*." Corran smiled. "Captain Nootka, have you got a course plotted out of here?"

"We have a course, X-wing."

"If you don't mind, I'll slave my navigation to yours and tag along. After all, I still owe you for the debris extractor."

"Consider the debt paid, X-wing, but come on along."

Corran heard gratitude in the Duros captain's voice. "This adventure will be a tale to tell, and I would have you there when I first tell it."

Prefect Mosh Barris bowed graciously amid the applause from his guests. The series of bright explosions and the spectacular light show of debris streaking through the upper atmosphere had been far more than he expected. *If you arranged that on purpose, Eamon, I shall give you rewards in excess of what I had already planned.*

He held a hand up. "Thank you, thank you all. I am pleased you have enjoyed how we have eliminated the Rebel threat to Garqi." Barris smiled proudly. "I was the architect of this event, but another carried it out. My aide, Eamon Yzalli. Eamon, where are you?"

"Indeed, where is he?"

Barris' head came up as a sharp voice asked the question from the balcony doorway. "Who are you?"

A tall, hatchet-faced man stooped slightly to make it through the door, then fixed Barris with a harsh stare. "I am Kirtan Loor, Imperial Intelligence. You have been expecting me?"

“Of course.” Barris gestured up at the sky, spraying choholl from the glass in his hand. “You came too late to see what happened to the Rebels.”

“Oh, I think I already know what happened to them.” The Imperial officer’s lip curled in a sneer. “As I came into the system, I was sent a report by this Eamon Yzalli. It indicates you arranged for the escape of the local Rebel organization on the *Star’s Delight*. The report indicates this action was the preliminary gambit in your bid to usurp Governor Tadrin and transfer Garqi to the Rebel Alliance.”

Barris’ stomach slowly wriggled into a knot. Kirtan Loor reminded him of a young Grand Moff Tarkin, and the resemblance did nothing to stop the fear flooding Barris’ mind. “This is wrong. This cannot be. Eamon must have planned this. Ask him, the accusations are not true.”

“I would ask him, but I cannot find him.” Loor’s blue eyes narrowed. “An appendix to his report said he feared for his life at your hands. When I arrived here I read that you had ordered and carried out his elimination. That message came from you, directly, I’ve checked.”

“Yes, but it was all part of the plan, don’t you see?”

Kirtan Loor shook his head solemnly. “I don’t see what you want me to see. What I *do* see is a Rebel collaborator with much to tell me about the enemy.”

“But I know nothing about them.”

“I doubt that very sincerely, Barris.” Loor smiled with a cold superiority that weakened Barris’ knees and sent his glass crashing to the floor. “By the time your interrogation is barely started, you will wish you knew even more, so you could tell me everything. You will be surprised how much information there truly is in your *nothing*—and you will learn to dread your punishment whenever you seek to feign ignorance as a shield.”

Corran had fully expected the look of surprise on Dynba Tesc's face when she first saw him. "Greetings, Dynba. I'm glad you made it. I apologize for the rough time the *Delight* had."

The war between horror and joy in her expression even proved entertaining, though the ultimate victor in the struggle proved to be a stunned look. "Y-you're dead ... at least you said you were dead. You're Eamon Yzalli, but you can't be."

Corran winced as hurt entered her voice. He scratched at his beard for a second, then shrugged. "I'm sorry for the deception. I intended for you to assume Barris had killed me and take off. I knew the TIEs would head out after you. I wanted to use you as a diversion one more time, so I could get away while the TIEs were busy with you."

A Twi'lek walked up behind Dynba and draped a head tail over her shoulder protectively. "The TIEs almost did us in because you disabled the shields. You tried to have us killed."

"Not my intention at all." Corran sighed. "I meant to have a message sent to you that would give you the code to bring the shields back up. I wanted to blame the shield tampering on Barris and have you protected, but the old fool went and deactivated my message account when he entered his death declaration about Eamon."

Dynba dug a gentle elbow into the Twi'lek's midsection. "Arali, if he wanted us dead, he'd not have come after the TIEs and given us the code. He still could have gotten away."

"Right." Corran nodded. "Exactly."

"So what did you mean about using us as a diversion 'one more time'?"

"Setting up the *Star's Delight's* escape allowed me to get the spare parts I needed for the X-wing. I told Barris they had been stolen from storage, but I really just had the guys who helped me load the things put them in the back of my speeder. They were the TIE pilots, so now we're the only ones who know where the parts ended up."

Dynba smiled. “The parts, of course. The phantom X-wing flights ended about a month before the *Delight* showed up and was taken.”

“I needed a debris extractor.”

“So, then, you’re Xeno. *You* got us together to eventually steal those parts for you.”

“No, I’m Corran Horn, late of the Corellian Security Force.” He smiled as Whistler came rolling up and patted the droid affectionately on the dome. “The droid here was Xeno.”

Arali’s head tails twitched with surprise. “A droid organized our little group?”

Whistler chirped emphatically and Corran beamed. “He worked with me in CorSec. In addition to astrogation programming, he’s a fairly good codeslicer and had a facility for putting together sting operations. He was grooming you to get the parts for me, but he didn’t mention it because he knows I don’t really want anything to do with the Rebellion and the New Republic.”

“It is a little late for that.” Captain Nootka came walking over with two Republic officers in tow. “Helping us escape will lead Barris to figure out who you were, and you will be branded a Rebel.”

“I don’t think so. Barris is in plenty of trouble himself.” Corran smiled broadly. “I once worked with Kirtan Loor, the Imperial Intelligence agent heading in to Garqi. This beard and dye job wouldn’t have fooled him, so I had to move. That’s the reason this whole operation got put together and involved you and your friends, Dynba. I would have kept you out of it, but I couldn’t.”

She shook her head. “You may think that, Corran, and may even want to believe it, but I think you couldn’t leave us behind to face Barris’ wrath if you weren’t around to moderate him.”

*Maybe you’re right, Dynba, but there is no true way of knowing.* He nodded slowly. “Loor isn’t the brightest of Imperial agents, but he can solve a case when it’s handed to him in a package, and the

package I left behind neatly implicates Mosh Barris in treason and Eamon Yzalli's murder. I should be clear."

One of the New Republic officers pointed at the X-wing. "That fighter just burned down four TIEs?"

Nootka tapped Corran on the shoulder. "He had the kills, Captain Dromath."

The other Rebel whistled. "They never got through your shields."

Corran shrugged. "Recharging shields is easier than finding paint to match."

The first officer nodded. "Look, Horn, I heard you say you don't want anything to do with the Rebellion or New Republic, but we need fighters like you."

"I'm not a joiner, Captain." Corran shook his head, then frowned down at Whistler when the droid jeered. "All I want is to be left alone. Your fight isn't my fight."

Dromath shrugged. "Perhaps not, but you're smart enough to know the Empire won't leave you alone. You will fight them, just as you did in getting these folks out of Garqi. If you have to fight them, doing so with allies is a lot better than doing it alone."

"He's right, Corran." Dynba reached out and gave Corran's left hand a squeeze. "The New Republic needs you."

"I don't know."

"Not an easy decision to make, true." Dromath smiled. "Think about this, though—orders came through letting us know Rogue Squadron is being reformed and brought back to active duty. Any pilots who think they're good enough to join are encouraged to apply. From what Nootka said, you're good enough to at least look into it."

Whistler squawked derisively.

Corran rapped a knuckle on the droid's dome. "I'm better than that, and you know it. I could be one of the hottest pilots they've got. Of course, I'd need a new R2 unit."

The droid's blatted reply prompted laughter from everyone. Corran suddenly realized, as he heard their voices all mix

together, that he'd not heard good, honest laughter in all the time he'd been on the run and in service on Garqi. Among the Imperials and their citizenry there was always something held back, a hedge against self-betrayal. *People couldn't let themselves go for fear someone might think ill of them and report them to the authorities.*

He thought for a moment. He knew all he really wanted was to be left alone, but Dromath had been right—the Empire would never leave him alone. Even if they were not there directly, even if Loor wasn't hot on his tail, the Empire's shadow would touch him except in places where it could not survive.

Among the Rebels.

In the New Republic.

"As being left alone isn't an option, I guess I might as well choose the folks with whom I have to co-exist." Corran slowly smiled and extended his hand to Captain Dromath. "If I heard you correctly, I think Whistler and I just might have an interest in joining Rogue Squadron."

"It won't be easy, Mister Horn."

"From what I've heard, Captain, it wouldn't be Rogue Squadron if joining was easy. But easy I don't want." Corran winked at Nootka and smiled at Dynba. "Remember, I've just left a backwater world where my droid led a Rebel cell and I helped evacuate enemies of the state, all the while plotting to bring down the military prefect. After that, the only place I'll find enough excitement to suit Whistler here is with the folks who have two Death Star kills to their credit. If I were willing to settle for anything less, I'd be joining the Imperial Navy and thinking it was a good career move."

It occurred to Barris, as guards dragged him toward the interrogation chamber, that his ears had been as deaf to Dynba Tesc's protests of ignorance as Loor's would be to his. It struck him as ironic that his descent had begun when he had done nothing on a world far away, and it would end because he *knew*

nothing on a world far away. He sought to share this insight with the men beside him, but it would only leave his throat disguised as hesitant laughter, punctuated by sobs.

And, somehow, he knew they understood.



# **Retreat from Coruscant**

## **by Laurie Burns**

Taryn Clancy idly watched a comm clerk notarize acceptance of the datacards piled on the repulsorlift cart beside her. Suddenly, the background murmur of the old Imperial Palace's message center disappeared under the hooting of alarms.

The clerk looked up, face draining of color as she identified the warning tones. "Oh my skies," she said, sounding stunned. "Coruscant's under attack."

Taryn's eyes widened too, but she moved fast. "If you'll sign that off, I'll be on my way," she said, swiveling to push the cart closer to the clerk's counter. "There's your mail," she added, pointedly holding out her hand.

The clerk blinked, looked at her datapad, punched a few keys, and mutely handed it over. Taryn swiftly inspected her authorization, keyed in her own code, then jerked the clerk's copy out and tossed it on the counter. "Thanks," she said over her shoulder, already three steps toward the door.

Out in the corridor the alarms continued at an urgent pitch, but as she squeezed aboard a turbolift, Taryn was relieved no one

seemed panicked. Though the New Republic had made the transition from military force to galactic government, the former Rebels obviously hadn't forgotten how to react to an Imperial attack. She bit her lip, knowing her hopes of leaving were optimistic at best. If Coruscant really was under attack, the planetary shield had probably been raised, and she and Del were stuck for the duration.

But she had to try. After all, who wanted to be stuck on the palace's landing pads like a clipped mynock while the Empire tried to reclaim its former capital?

*Not me*, she thought, emerging onto the bright, windswept platform and blinking at the brilliance of the midday sun. Reverberations from half-a-dozen ships' engines thrummed around her, and ahead, the *Messenger* added its throaty roar to the mechanical chorus. Del had the ramp down and waiting, and as she dropped into the pilot's seat, a quick scan of the displays showed they were nearly ready to lift.

"Heard the alarms," Del said, already strapped in at the co-pilot's station. "What's up?"

"Us, I hope," Taryn said shortly. Another look at the displays, and she flipped on the comm and hailed palace flight control. Her heart sank as her request for liftoff was curtly denied.

Too late—the planetary shield had been raised. The Empire was up there, the New Republic was down here, and she and the *Messenger* were stuck in between.

Taryn slumped back in her seat. It wasn't just that she had a schedule to keep. The Core Courier Service promised prompt service among the Core Worlds, and with crates full of communications still filling half her hold, she didn't want to get too far behind. But late deliveries were nothing compared to what Taryn feared was about to happen—an all-out war for possession of Coruscant. Port gossip had predicted that the Empire, despite the recent loss of Grand Admiral Thrawn, was gearing up to strike at the heart of the New Republic.

It looked like they'd been right.

“Well, heck,” Del said, staring out at the platform where a transport—apparently in defiance of the controller’s orders—was lifting off. “What’re we gonna do now?”

Taryn watched the transport fade to a pinprick in the sky. If the *Messenger* belonged to her, she’d be tempted to do the same. But a smart captain didn’t take chances with company property. “We wait,” she said, reluctantly keying off the engines. “At least until help arrives.”

*If it ever did*, she added silently. The Imperials would’ve knocked out the comm relays first thing, cutting off the New Republic’s ability to call for help from its fleets scattered through the galaxy. They had orbital defenses, of course, but—A tiny flash caught her eye, and she leaned forward to squint out the cockpit’s transparisteel viewport. “Blast,” she whispered.

Del followed her gaze and saw the almost indiscernible flashes of turbolaser fire high in the sky. “We’re stuck now,” he said.

They watched in grim silence for a while before Taryn abruptly wondered, “How long can the planetary shield hold up?”

“I dunno,” Del said. “Depends on what they throw at it, prob’ly. Couple of days, maybe ... or a couple hours.”

She glanced at him. Under his gray mustache, her first mate’s mouth was tight. And no wonder—after three decades with the courier service, he was just days away from retirement. Studying the lines on his face, Taryn mentally contrasted his years of experience to her own, and suddenly felt overwhelmed with her fledgling status as captain. It *was* only her fourth run at the helm of the *Messenger*.

And it was up to her to get them out of this.

For a second she felt a niggling of the old fear; the one with her father’s voice that said she flew for the courier service because she didn’t have the guts to do anything else. All through her childhood, Kal Clancy boasted of his own bravado at the helm of his freighter, then he’d spent her teen years trying to mold her in his image. He hadn’t bothered concealing his disappointment when she hadn’t lived up to his expectations.

She looked at Del again. He'd been delivering mail longer than she'd been alive, and hadn't ever made captain. That said something for her, didn't it? *Didn't it?*

*Stop it, Taryn ordered herself. So being captain of a courier isn't very challenging. That doesn't mean I'm not competent.*

Shaking off her father's image, she tried to think what to do next.

*Does it?*

After a few hours passed with no sign of Imperial ships slipping down from the sky, Taryn's nerves began to ease. Seven hours after the alarms first sounded, full night had fallen, and she was starting to get annoyed.

"Well, that's it," she declared after another request for information from flight control was politely sidestepped. "We can't leave, they won't let us move, and they won't tell us anything. I'm going in there to find out what's going on."

"Who you gonna ask?" Del asked.

"Mon Mothma herself, if I have to," Taryn said.

Del snorted, but getting into the palace proved unexpectedly easy. After an initial hassle with two New Republic security officers, once they discovered she captained the freighter on the platform, Taryn found herself ushered into a turbolift. One of the guards poked his head in after her and punched a button on the call panel. "Good luck," he said, giving her a mock salute as the doors slid shut.

*That was easy—too easy,* she thought, wondering what that salute thing meant. She was still puzzling over it when the doors opened on a corridor clearly far removed from the service section of the palace where she'd made her delivery earlier. Same basic decor, but this section had an unmistakably brisk military air.

As did the two armed troopers standing against the wall across from the turbolift. They eyed her alertly as she stepped out, then

she saw the other two, standing on each side of the lift. Trying to ignore the four pairs of eyes trained on her, she glanced down the corridor. At one end, a blast door slid open and a frowning officer stalked toward her. Halting a meter away, he gave her a quick once-over.

"I'm Colonel Bremen," he identified himself. "And you're—?"

"Taryn Clancy, captain of the *Messenger*."

He nodded curtly. "If you're armed, you'll have to leave your weapons outside," he said, producing a handheld weapons scanner.

"I'm not," Taryn said, but Bremen ran the device over her anyway.

"All right," he said, apparently satisfied. "Follow me."

A guard fell in line behind her as Taryn followed Bremen through the blast doors into another corridor. She glanced curiously into open rooms as they passed, feet faltering as a face she thought she recognized from the holovid flashed into view. Was that *really* Mon Mothma? And if it *were* the New Republic's Chief of State, just where was this Bremen taking her?

There was no time to speculate, as he stopped beside a door and gestured for her to enter. Taryn stepped into the small office and looked at the man seated behind the desk. Good-looking and about the same age as Del, he looked vaguely familiar but she couldn't place him.

That is, until Bremen shut the door and brushed past her. "Got another one for you, General Bel Iblis. Captain Clancy of the *Messenger*," he said, and Taryn tried not to stare. She'd expected to be pawned off on some palace flunky, not brought to the man in charge of Coruscant's defense!

"Captain Clancy." Bel Iblis nodded to her courteously as Bremen folded his arms and took up a position against the office wall. "I understand you'd like an update on the situation."

"Yes, sir, I would," she said, making a conscious effort to relax and not stand at attention. "What's going on? And when will I be able to leave?"

Bel Iblis studied her silently. Just as Taryn began to fear she'd been too brash, he grimly answered. "Coruscant is surrounded. Our defenses have been forced to retreat, and we estimate the planetary shield will fail by morning."

Taryn forgot not to stare. "What'll happen then?"

"We're not waiting to find out," he said. "We'll be pulling out tonight."

"You're leaving?"

"We have no choice," Bel Iblis said heavily. "There's no way to get word to our fleets in other sectors, and even if we did, they couldn't get here before the shield fails."

"But, what about the New Republic?" she persisted. Was the fledgling government really going to crumble that easily?

"The New Republic will survive," he said. "Only its headquarters will move." Something like old pain briefly shadowed his eyes. "We don't want Coruscant destroyed too, when all the Empire wants is to destroy us. Once we're off the planet, the populace ought to be safe enough."

Bremen abruptly unfolded from the wall and opened his mouth, but subsided at a look from Bel Iblis. Taryn glanced from one to the other, suddenly aware of the tension between them, then looked back at Bel Iblis. "Where will you go?"

"Good question," he said. "That's where you come in."

"Me?" she said, warily.

"We need all the lifting capacity we can beg, borrow, or steal for the evacuation," he said, watching her intently.

Taryn got it, right away.

"The *Messenger's* not that big," she protested. "Not that fast, either. Besides, I work for the Core Courier Service, not for you. The New Republic can't just hijack my ship!"

"Actually, we can," Bel Iblis said. "And will. But not for what you think." He leaned forward, looking grave. "We've got to get word to the sector fleets that the New Republic has evacuated Coruscant and will regroup at a new base. Secrecy is absolutely vital—we can't take the chance of the Empire tapping into any

transmissions and overhearing the location of our rendezvous point. So,” he spread his hands suggestively, “we send out couriers.”

Taryn remained silent. She suspected he hadn’t said “courier” by chance.

“Usually, we’d send out a messenger in an unmarked Intelligence ship,” Bel Iblis said. Bremen opened his mouth, and again, the general shot him a warning glance. “But we need everything we’ve got for the evacuation.”

“What if I refuse?”

“You’re welcome to remain here on Coruscant,” Bel Iblis said. “Or leave on one of our transports. We’ll recompense the courier service for use of the ship, of course.”

*Some choice*, Taryn thought sourly. *Stuck here waiting for the stormtroopers, or on the run with the New Republic.*

She sighed. “So, when do we leave?”

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Once she’d thought about it, Taryn had to agree using the *Messenger* for cover was actually pretty clever.

For one, the datacard—with its report on the retreat from Coruscant and the rendezvous location—was nicely anonymous, tucked in a crate with thousands of other datacards; communications bound for other Core Worlds. And that crate was just one among dozens exactly like it, stacked one on top of the other in the *Messenger*’s hold.

For another, the prospect of trying to sneak past an armada of Star Destroyers was almost made bearable by the sight the bulky Colonel Bremen made, stuffed into a spare uniform they’d scrounged up that was at least two sizes too small. Tugging at the too-tight collar, he stood in the cockpit doorway with the slight frown that never seemed to leave his face. Taryn didn’t have to look away from her engine displays to know the uniform’s pant legs ended somewhere above his ankles. Her mouth quirked

slightly before she remembered Bremen was here to keep an eye on her and Del, and there was nothing funny about the situation they were in.

Her hands tightened on the controls. "Go strap in," she ordered Bremen. "We're almost ready to lift." When he didn't move, she glanced over her shoulder questioningly. "What?"

"I'll stay here," he said.

She shrugged.

"Do what you want." Del snorted. He and Bremen hadn't exchanged half a dozen words since the New Republic officer had come on board, but they clearly hadn't hit it off.

"You should let me pilot," Bremen said, again. "This isn't some simple mail drop, you know."

"No," Taryn said adamantly, as if this hadn't already been covered in Bel Iblis' office. "We made a deal. The New Republic can use my ship, but no one's flying it but me." Considering they were basically being shanghaied, she'd been surprised Bel Iblis had agreed. As it was, she half suspected the general had assigned Bremen to this mission just to get rid of him. The two clearly didn't get along. She glanced at Del. "Ready?"

"Ready," he confirmed.

She eased in the repulsors. Below, the comforting lights of Imperial City dwindled to pinpricks as they gained altitude. Bel Iblis had said the gaps between the surrounding Star Destroyers were guarded by smaller capital ships, so each pilot would have to pick their own escape route and make a run for it. "We got a course yet?" she asked Del.

"Nav computer's working on it," he said. She threw a quick look at Bremen, balancing himself in the cockpit's doorway, then checked the sensors. Nothing close enough to worry about, but she'd have to stay sharp. Bel Iblis wanted as many ships as possible in the air and moving when he dropped the shield. With the whole swarm fleeing at once, they hoped to at least create a little confusion as they tried to sneak past the waiting Imperials.



Flashes of light danced where the planetary shield was still getting blasted, the opalescent haze shifting and rippling as it was hit. Taryn changed course slightly, aiming for a clear spot, then checked her chronometer. Almost time.

Del flipped on the comm, already tuned to the escape frequency, and as Taryn stared at the shield, she wondered what the people left below would face. Would the Empire be content to simply retake Coruscant and leave its citizens in relative peace? Or would it feel the need to punish them for not repulsing the New Republic in the first place?

Either way, she was out of it now.

“Ought to be down any time,” Bremen said from behind her, where he too was watching the shield flash under the Imperial assault. “Too bad this thing doesn’t have much in the way of weaponry.”

Taryn’s mouth tightened at the slur to her ship. As she’d already pointed out, mail freighters weren’t prime targets for anyone, even pirates. There was no need to go around bristling with armament—usually. At the moment, she conceded a little more firepower might come in handy.

Several large masses started to register on the scopes, indicating the gauntlet ahead. Taryn had never seen so many Star Destroyers in one place, and another wave of self-doubt assailed her. She’d never done anything like this before, except in her imagination. Maybe she *should* let Bremen take the controls—

And then, it was too late.

“It’s down,” Bel Iblis’ voice rang out over the comm. “Clear skies, people, and may the Force be with you!”

The planetary shield was down, and the scramble was on.

Far to port, Taryn was aware of a planet defender ion cannon being used from the surface to clear a path for some of the fleeing ships, but she kept to her own vector as they cleared the atmosphere and the waiting Imperial ships came into sight.

There it was—her path to freedom—straight between two Star Destroyers flanked by five smaller Dreadnaughts. They

looked like two ferocious Dorax dogs surrounded by feisty puppies, and she swallowed, edging the drive up to full. Even at top speed, the *Messenger* couldn't be called fast, and she could only hope they'd be overlooked in the swarm fleeing from the surface.

And for a while, her hopes seemed answered. Aiming for a gap between the two Dreadnaughts furthest away from the Star Destroyers, the *Messenger* pelted along in the wake of another freighter, a transport, and a sleek starfighter. Alongside and slightly behind were two heavy transports. The Dreadnaughts fired, but with so many small targets, the shots were erratic and for the most part simply sizzled into space.

Their shield indicators were still green, they were nearly past the Dreadnaughts, and Taryn was beginning to think they just might make it unscathed when a sudden sharp lurch of the ship threw her and Del against their restraints, and sent Bremen tumbling forward to sprawl unceremoniously over the sensor scopes.

"Get off!" she gritted, then clenched her teeth as another hard *thunk* spilled him to the deck. With a jolt, she saw a lot more ships around them than had been there a moment ago. Identification was easy as a TIE fighter roared past, firing at the transport ahead of them driving for deep space.

"Del?" she said. The grizzled first mate needed no further urging, loosing a volley of laser fire at the TIE fighter harassing the transport up ahead. Behind them, a dull *clunk* indicated another hit, but Taryn kept going. Their course was calculated and set; if she could just get the *Messenger* a little further away from the planet, they could make the jump to lightspeed, and safety.

One of the transports off to their side suddenly exploded in a fiery flash. Wincing, Taryn changed course slightly to steer clear of the twisted metal and spared a quick glance at the shield indicators.

Only to wish she hadn't. The indicators had gone from green to red, and they flashed with each hit. A diagnostic message was forming on the panel, the sensors showed another of those blasted TIE fighters swooping up behind them, and Taryn didn't think the *Messenger* could take too many more hits.

"Hang on," she warned Bremen, still on the deck, and threw the freighter into a dive. The TIE fighter shot past overhead, and as she brought the ship's nose back up, Taryn saw the starfighter ahead had circled back to help.

The X-wing's laser cannon flashed as it screamed toward them, and on the scopes, one of the dots behind them disappeared. The X-wing turned its attention to the TIE fighter she'd shaken while Taryn wiped at the sweat on her face and put the drive to full again. Up ahead, the freighter and transport were nowhere to be seen. Either they'd already made it to safety—or they'd been destroyed.

Del cursed as the *Messenger* shuddered from another series of hits to the rear. The shield indicators flashed red, then went black, and the diagnostic message began to blink. "We've lost the deflectors," Taryn shouted. Swallowing back the metallic taste of fear, she was poised to plunge the ship into another dive when the console pinged, indicating they'd reached their hyperspace point.

Wrapping a hand around the levers and acutely aware of the TIE fighter closing in on them, she gently pulled back, and was rewarded by the sight of stars streaking to starlines, then fading into the mottled sky of hyperspace.

Hurting through hyperspace toward Coriallis, Del and Colonel Bremen had plenty of time to firmly establish their mutual dislike.

Bremen didn't hide the fact that, as civilians, he didn't trust Taryn and Del to be competent. He made it clear he thought Bel Iblis should have commandeered the *Messenger*, kicked off her

regular crew, and used an all-military crew to complete the mission.

Taryn tried to shrug it off, but Del retaliated by offering up barely concealed barbs concerning the New Republic's ignominious retreat from Coruscant, while Bremen grew tighter-lipped with each crack. She thought the game childish, but as long as Bremen was busy with Del, he wasn't breathing down her back, so she didn't say anything about it.

The two had disappeared into the hold more than an hour ago, and she stood in the wardroom, wiping grease off her hands. They would be changing course at Coriallis in a few hours, and she wanted to try out the newly repaired deflector system before it was actually put to the test.

She never got the chance.

As she strode toward the cockpit, the *Messenger* seemed to hesitate underfoot, then gave an awful shudder as stressed hull metal squealed in protest. Caught mid-step, Taryn grabbed at the bulkhead for balance, then got thrown into the cockpit as the ship seemed to slam into some immovable force. Clattering crates and a yelp sounded from the hold, while in front of her, the mottled sky of hyperspace unexpectedly became starlines, and then, with a final sickening lurch, coalesced into the starfield of realspace.

They'd been forcefully yanked out of lightspeed, and Taryn didn't even have to check the scopes to know why. Straight ahead, filling the transparisteel viewport, was an Imperial Interdictor cruiser.

Nor were they its first catch. A transport with New Republic markings drifted nearby, linked with an Imperial shuttle. Taryn wondered if it were one of the many that had so recently fled Coruscant.

"What happened?" Bremen demanded, pounding up the corridor as she got to her feet. On his heels, Del sported a fresh gash on his forehead. No answer was necessary as the comm

crackled to life and a brisk voice from the cruiser *Requital* ordered them to prepare to be boarded.

Taryn sank down in the pilot's seat, mind racing. The datacard was well-hidden, and unless the Imperials were determined to read each and every missive in the hold, she didn't think they'd find it. The thoroughness of their search would probably depend on how suspicious they were. Her and Del's identification was in order; Bremen might be harder to explain, but she'd think of something. Should she admit that they'd just come from Coruscant, or—?

"I'll do the talking," Bremen announced, interrupting her thoughts. "You two keep quiet and let me handle it." He held out a hand, apparently expecting Taryn to hand over the captain's bars pinned to the front of her uniform. She stiffened.

"No, *I'll* do the talking," she corrected him with some asperity. "You looked in a mirror lately?" Clad in that ill-fitting uniform, the Imperials would never believe he was captain of the *Messenger*. Ignoring Bremen's flush of outrage, she told Del, "Go back to the airlock and wait to assist the boarding party."

"Yes, ma'am," he said crisply, backing out of the cockpit.

"Cooperate with them, *fully*," she called after him warningly. Outside, a shuttle from the *Requital* was approaching, but they still had a few minutes. Looking at Bremen, she raised an eyebrow. "Now. You were saying—?"

"Do you have any idea how serious this is?" he snapped back. "What do you think they're going to do once they're on board? Take a look at your permits, tell you to have a good day, and just leave?"

"I certainly hope so," Taryn said. "That seemed to be General Bel Iblis' idea behind using us as the courier. Look, *I'm* the captain here, and I have the proper ID to back it up. You have any better ideas?"

His resistance was plain, but she did have a point. "Okay, then," Taryn said. "You don't talk unless you're spoken to, you do everything the Imperials ask, promptly and courteously, and if

you're carrying any weapons, you lose them now, before they come on board. Understand?"

Bremen's face looked as stiff as a droid's and his eyes glittered, but he managed a short nod. "Good," Taryn said, releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Let's go back and meet our guests."

While the Imperial shuttle pulled alongside, she dug out the *Messenger's* permits datapad. She just had time to get back to the airlock and straighten up authoritatively before it slid open and five Imperials strode in.

The lead, a middle-aged man balding under his naval officer's cap, halted just inside while the other four troopers, all armed, fanned out in the corridor. "Commander Voldt," he briskly identified himself. "Who's in charge here?"

"I am." Taryn stepped forward. "Captain Taryn Clancy, of the Core Courier Service. This is my crew."

Voldt eyed her, gaze lingering on the curves of her uniform, then slid a glance over Del and Bremen. He noted Bremen's exposed ankles, then flicked pale eyes back to her. "Courier service? This a mail ship?"

"Yes, sir," Taryn said. "En route to Coriallis."

"Where from?"

She'd already decided there was no sense lying. The vector on which they'd been yanked out of hyperspace pretty well spelled it out. "Our last scheduled stop was Coruscant," she told him. "But we dropped into the system, saw what looked like the entire Imperial fleet around the planet, and decided to give the place a pass. Didn't want to get mixed up in anything, you know?"

He nodded slowly, not looking entirely convinced. "You didn't deliver your shipment?" he asked. "Don't your employers promise prompt delivery?"

Taryn allowed herself to look slightly taken aback. "Well, yes," she said. "But they frown on dropping in on a war zone even more."

Voldt stared at her, then snorted. In amusement, or disbelief, she couldn't tell. At his casual hand gesture, two of the troopers disappeared to search the ship. "Let's see some identification," he suggested.

"Certainly." Taryn passed him the permits datapad. He transmitted the ship's license and registry information to the *Requital* to be checked out, then inspected their identification, raising an eyebrow when Bremen failed to produce an ID. Bremen managed to look both embarrassed and earnest as he muttered, "Sorry, sir. Got robbed in port."

Voldt flicked that speculative glance over his uniform again. "Looks like that's not all they took," he commented. "How inconvenient for you."

Bremen nodded. Voldt stared at him a moment longer, then glanced at the two troopers returning from searching the ship. "No one else aboard, sir," one reported, while the other stepped up holding two blasters.

"Who do these belong to?" Voldt asked.

"That one's mine," Taryn said, indicating the blaster she kept hidden under the sleep pad in her cabin. She looked at Bremen and Del. "Whose is this?"

"Mine, Capt'n." Del stepped forward. "I know you don't like us carryin' on board, so I had it stashed in my bunk. Sorry," he added, looking sheepish.

"We'll discuss it later," she said repressively, wondering where Bremen had "lost" his weapon so it wouldn't be found.

Voldt gave her an unfathomable look, then nodded to the trooper, who stepped back, still holding both blasters. He handed the datapad back to Taryn. "Captain, I'd like to see the contents of your hold, if I may."

Despite the phrasing, it wasn't a request.

Taryn led the way, trying to gauge how suspicious the Imperials were, and how complete they might insist on making this search. So far, Voldt's manner hadn't given anything away. Casually, she looked over her shoulder. "If you don't mind me

asking, sir, why were we stopped? Is this some sort of checkpoint?"

There was no mistaking the amused snort this time. "You could call it that," Voldt said dryly. His eyes were fixed on the sway of her dark hair against her back. "It could be considered a checkpoint for traitors."

"Traitors?" she echoed, carefully.

"Traitors to the Empire," he said, finally looking up as they reached the hold. "Rebels, fleeing from Coruscant. We've driven them off and rescued the populace from their terrorist ways, but now, like the cowards they are, they're scurrying off to wherever they think they'll find safety." His thin lips turned up in an unpleasant smile. "We don't intend to let them run too far."

Taryn wondered if Interdictor cruisers were sitting along all of the most well-traveled hyperspace lanes leading from Coruscant. If so, a good many fleeing ships had undoubtedly fallen right into the Imperials' trap, including that transport she'd spotted earlier. Perhaps even themselves.

She shook off the thought. *No, so far we're doing fine.* The only thing to worry about was the datacard, and that was well hidden somewhere inside the crates that filled the hold. Reassured, she keyed open the door and gestured for Voldt to step in.

He did, glancing around the room and then stepping over to peer at the stacks of sealed crates. "These are bound for Coriallis," he noted, studying the labels on the outermost crates.

"Yes, sir, that's our next stop," Taryn confirmed.

"But where's the shipment you *didn't* leave on Coruscant?" He swung to face her, one eyebrow raised in query.

Where was it, indeed? Taryn's stomach clenched as she considered the question. Not only had they delivered the mail bound for the Imperial Palace, but they'd off-loaded the regular Coruscant mail, too. There was nothing here to back up her assertion that they hadn't landed on the planet.

Excuses vied for space on the tip of her tongue, but before she could blurt any of them out, Del stepped forward.



"I moved 'em out of the way, Capt'n," he said, and indicated three crates piled haphazardly in the far corner. Each was labeled bound for Coruscant, and she held her breath as Voldt insisted on opening up all three. But randomly picking out datacards to inspect, he found them all properly labeled with Coruscant destinations. Relieved, Taryn slanted a glance at her first mate, wondering whose mail had been borrowed to pull off this masquerade. Clearly, Del and Bremen hadn't spent *all* their time back here bickering.

"Hmmp," Voldt grunted as he replaced the last crate's lid, and looked around the hold as if hoping to find Mon Mothma herself hiding among the load lifters. Pointing at two of the troopers, he ordered all the crates examined. But the search was cursory, with the troopers merely opening them up and confirming there was mail inside.

Brusquely ordering the crates resealed, Voldt motioned for Taryn and crew to follow him, and strode back down the corridor to the airlock. Calling the *Requital*, he confirmed that the *Messenger's* permits were in order and then, looking somewhat disappointed, told Taryn they were free to go.

Trying not to let her relief show, she had to work harder to keep from shooting a told-you-so look at Bremen. The four troopers rejoined them, and after an unexpected handshake from Voldt, during which he held on a tad too long for Taryn's liking, the Imperials headed back to their ship.

She got the nav computer busy recalculating their course, then turned the freighter around and drove for the stars, trying to grab enough distance to jump to lightspeed. Glancing again at the captured New Republic transport, Taryn wondered what fate awaited its occupants.

When the console finally pinged, she cupped her hand around the hyperdrive levers, gently pulled them back, and gratefully left that particular problem behind.

Not that she didn't still have problems, she thought in exasperation nearly a week later, staring out at the empty expanse of space before them and acutely aware of Bremen looking over her shoulder, as usual.

The rest of the trip to Coriallis had been uneventful, and once there, Bremen had programmed the nav computer with a new course. Since then, they'd dropped in and out of hyperspace a dozen times on their way to intercept one of the New Republic's battle fleets, somewhere in the Borderlands.

At least, Taryn thought it was the Borderlands. She didn't recognize the majority of the places they popped in on, and Bremen saw no reason to enlighten her—about their location, or anything else. He curtly informed her she'd get control of the *Messenger* back once they intercepted the fleet and delivered the message.

Well, here they were at the intercept point. So where was the fleet?

"They might be a little late," Bremen said, and Taryn glanced over her shoulder to see a furrow creasing his brow. "They *are* scheduled to be here," he added at the expression on her face.

"If they don't know we're coming, what are they scheduled to meet?" she asked. Bremen ignored the question; clearly, this was yet another bit of information that mere civilians couldn't be trusted with. Since they'd dropped into the outer edges of a system and were skulking around like thieves instead of getting closer to one of the planets, Taryn figured the New Republic had an outpost here that its fleet was checking up on. Bremen just didn't want to get close enough for her and Del to take a look.

She sighed. Despite a week of close quarters living, or perhaps because of it, Bremen wasn't any easier to get along with. She'd finally had to order Del to stop his needling—if only she could order Bremen to knock off his condescending manner, as well. His attitude reminded her far too strongly of her father.

Because it was possible the fleet had been delayed, and because they really had nowhere else to go, the *Messenger* simply

drifted for the next several hours. Taryn was sitting in the cockpit staring out at the stars and trying to recall astrogation charts of the Borderlands region when Bremen came in and dropped into the co-pilot's seat.

Mildly surprised, she glanced over as he studied the long-range sensors. He'd finally stopped hovering over her, apparently reassured she wasn't going to break into the nav computer to find out where they were if he didn't keep an eye on her every minute. Naturally, she had, only to find that all records of their past several jumps had been erased.

So it wasn't so much a matter of trust, as that it simply didn't matter.

"You don't think much of us, do you?" she said.

He took his time looking up. "Pardon?"

"It's not just you and your New Republic on the line here, you know. It's me and Del, too," she said. "If you're caught, we're caught. You think we're going to do anything to mess this thing up?"

"Not deliberately, no," he conceded. "But accidents happen. What about when Voldt wanted to see the Coruscant mail—you hadn't thought of that, had you? What if there hadn't been anything to show him?"

"That cloak and dagger stuff is *your* department," she retorted, but the comment stung. He was right; and instead of getting defensive, she should admit it and learn from the experience. "That doesn't justify treating us like dimglows, and keeping me in the dark about where we're going. I have a right to know."

He folded his arms and gave her a level stare. "Captain Clancy, it's no secret I don't think you or Del Sato should have been allowed on this mission. You're civilians, and more of a hindrance than a help. You can't be expected to make the kind of split-second decisions needed to keep us out of trouble."

Taryn flushed, and concentrated on keeping her temper as he continued. "But you're here anyway, so consider being 'kept in

the dark' as your protection. If you don't know anything, you can't give it away."

"What do you take me for?" she asked, affronted. "If I wanted to give you up, I would've done it when Voldt was aboard. You'll notice I didn't."

"No, you didn't," he agreed. "But it's better to be prepared than be sorry."

Taryn was debating whether it was even worth discussing any further when she was saved from a decision by a sudden blip on the sensors.

A ship, emerging from hyperspace about 30 kilometers away.

She reacted before Bremen did, flipping switches to start bringing the engines on line. "Del!" she yelled down the corridor, trying to maneuver the sluggish *Messenger* around to face the oncoming ship. As it came into view, Taryn identified it as a slightly battered-looking Skipray blastboat, with no markings indicating who it might belong to. But it clearly wasn't the fleet.

*Great*, she thought grimly even as the comm light flashed, indicating the starfighter was hailing them. She flipped it on as Del arrived, noting the engines were only up to point three-five power. They wouldn't be able to run, just yet.

A cool female voice came over the comm speaker. "Unidentified freighter, do you need assistance?" it asked, as the Skipray slanted to the side a bit, putting it just out of line with the *Messenger's* laser cannon. Taryn kept the freighter turning to face the potential threat as she answered.

"This is Captain Clancy of the *Messenger*, and thanks, but no, we're fine," she said quickly, before Bremen could jump in. He got out of Del's seat and stood in the small space between them, frowning out at the blastboat.

"Captain Clancy? You're just who I'm looking for," the voice said as Taryn took another look at her displays. Up to point six-five power; at least they could start moving. She started the ship sidling away as the Skipray's pilot asked, "I wonder if I might speak with your guest?"

An unexpected request, and there was a slight inflection on the last word that made Taryn glance up at Bremen. To her surprise, he appeared to be gritting his teeth. "This is Bremen," he said shortly.

"Ah, Colonel. This is Mara Jade," the pilot identified herself. "I see you made it off Coruscant in one piece." She sounded vaguely amused.

"Get to the point," Bremen snapped. Taryn and Del looked at him in astonishment. Even at his most supercilious with them, he'd never been downright rude.

"The *point* is that your rendezvous with the Borderlands fleet is off," she said, clearly unruffled. "They took a detour, and won't be through here for days. High Command's already sent a new courier out to their location, so you're off the hook."

"I wasn't notified of any change," Bremen said.

"You're *being* notified."

"Why'd they send you?" he shot back.

"Because word of the fleet's location came through one of my contacts in the smuggler's coalition," she said. "Information *is* what we're getting paid for."

Now Taryn thought she understood Bremen's animosity. If this Mara Jade were a smuggler, Bremen's law-and-order stance wouldn't allow him much in the way of tolerance. "Do you have any confirmation of that?" he was asking.

"Just the fleet's new location," she answered coolly. "If you're ready, I'll transmit it to you." A data feed light on the panel lit up, and a series of numbers scrolled past on the display. "Not that you need it," she added. "High Command said you could go on home."

"Thanks, but maybe we'll just stick around here a while longer," Bremen said, clearly still suspicious.

There was a pause from the Skipray. "Suit yourself," Mara finally said. The comm light winked out as the ship swung around and started heading away. Before Taryn could ask

Bremen how long he planned to wait, another ship suddenly dropped into space ahead of them.

Bremen swore viciously even as Taryn recognized the distinctive shape of a *Carrack*-class cruiser. “Go, go!” he barked at her as the comm light lit up again and a harsh voice ordered them to stop or be destroyed. Taryn turned the freighter away from the cruiser’s ominous bulk and slapped at the thrust. She and Del were slammed back in their seats as the *Messenger* leapt forward, Bremen somehow managing to hang on as they drove for deep space. Out of the corner of her eye, Taryn saw the Skipray had turned and was coming back to their position, and a moment later, the sensors told her why.

The cruiser had launched TIE fighters.

“Oh blast it, not again,” she muttered. Luck had seen the *Messenger* through its first encounter with TIE fighters; she doubted it would be any match for them this time. “Del, get us a course out of here,” she snapped, trying to gauge how soon the two fighters would overtake them.

“I can’t—I don’t even know where we are!” he snapped back.

“What about those?” Taryn indicated the coordinates Mara Jade had transmitted, still displayed on the console.

“No!” Bremen objected. “She could have set a trap. That cruiser didn’t just show up by chance.” He lurched as a thump to the *Messenger*’s rear indicated that the TIE fighters had caught up. “Now she’s back to finish the job,” he added bitterly, glaring at the Skipray as it headed towards them.

Lasers flashed as it neared, and Taryn wondered if he were right. But the Skipray zipped past overhead, and a moment later one of the dots on the sensor scopes blinked out. “I wouldn’t hang around, if I were you,” Mara Jade advised, and Taryn decided it was time for one of those split-second command decisions Bremen thought beyond her.

“Use ’em,” she ordered Del, who was already busy with the nav computer. Bremen protested, but before he could intervene another hit rocked the ship, sending him stumbling. By the time

he'd clawed his way back up to position behind Taryn, the *Messenger's* shield indicator flickered an ominous red again.

Hands tense on the controls, Taryn tried to avoid the laser fire which peppered their aft end. But the old freighter simply wasn't a match for the faster starfighter. If it weren't for the Skipray harassing the TIE and forcing it to split its attention between two targets, the *Messenger* would've already been blown to bits.

They still might be.

Another hard lurch threw Bremen against the back of Taryn's chair. Clinging to the seat, he looked over her shoulder at the sensors and shouted something. Just as she glanced down at the displays and realized with a jolt that the cruiser's remaining two TIE fighters were on their way to join the attack, the nav computer finally pinged.

She pulled back the levers, and they escaped into the blessed emptiness of hyperspace.

It turned out to be a rather short hop.

Barely an hour after their escape from the cruiser, the proximity alarm clanged, indicating a minute to breakout. Bremen had spent most of the trip threatening to abort the jump, but even he was unwilling to risk stressing the *Messenger* with a second unexpected emergence.

Despite Taryn pointing out that the Skipray had aided in their getaway, he remained convinced that Mara Jade had sold them out to the Imperials. He saw no other explanation for the cruiser's appearance. "A panthac doesn't change its stripes," he said darkly, but declined to explain the comment.

The console pinged again, and Taryn eased back the hyperdrive levers. Mottled sky became starlines, which became stars. They'd arrived.

There was nothing nearby, but the long-range sensors showed a number of ships some distance off their port side. Within

moments, they were close enough to identify. It was, indeed, the New Republic fleet.

She let Bremen do the talking when the Mon Calamari cruiser *Hope* hailed them. Its captain confirmed a messenger from the New Republic had already arrived. "But we're still glad to see you," Captain Arboga added in his gravelly voice. "The datacard he brought us appears damaged, and we'd like to compare it with yours to fill in the blanks."

The only thing left to do was drop Bremen and his datacard off. Greatly relieved at the prospect, Taryn headed for the *Hope*. They were still several kilometers out when Bremen stepped into the cockpit holding a small circular object.

Her eyes widened in horror when she saw it. "Where did *that* come from?"

"The hold," Bremen told her grimly. "Ironically, in the same crate the datacard was hidden. The Imperials must have planted it when they restacked the crates." The card in his other hand indicated that it, at least, had escaped Imperial treachery. "That must've been how they found us," he added grudgingly, a half-hearted concession that the cruiser's appearance hadn't been Mara Jade's fault, after all. Leaning past Taryn, he flipped on the comm. "Captain," he reported, "we've found a homing beacon..."

"And we've found who's tracking it," Arboga cut him off. "Take a look aft."

Taryn glanced at the scopes and stifled a groan. The cruiser they'd so recently escaped had appeared behind them. Jabbing the drive up to full, she mentally cursed as the sudden thrust shoved her back in her seat. She and Del had been so close to going home. Now here they were, stuck in the middle of another battle between the Empire and the New Republic.

"It's no match for the entire fleet," Del said, sounding surprised the cruiser continued to follow them.



“But it’s more than a match for this scow, if we don’t get out of range,” Bremen added tightly. He glared at Taryn. “Can’t you get a little more speed out of this thing?”

She clenched her teeth. Enough was enough. “Just shut up,” she gritted. “If you’d done *your* job and found that damn beacon when they planted it, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Bremen opened his mouth, but a *thunk* to the rear cut off whatever he’d been about to say. The deflector indicator flickered weakly, and Taryn glanced down to see a diagnostic message scroll across the display. She looked at Del. His face was tense as he, too, summed up the shields’ sorry state. The *Messenger* shuddered with another hit, and the diagnostic message turned red and began to flash. Del looked grimly resigned.

Leaning forward, Taryn tapped a button and a previously dark section of the board lit up. “The backup shield generator,” she said shortly at Del’s astonished expression. “I finished it while fixing the main after we got away from Coruscant.”

“But, we didn’t have all the parts,” he said.

“You just have to know where to look,” Taryn said, thinking of how she’d cannibalized the main generator to jury-rig the backup. Redundant shields were a precaution she’d learned from her father, and she’d installed a backup generator in every ship she’d worked on. Seldom needed, she hadn’t hurried to get the *Messenger*’s up and running. But the retreat from Coruscant had changed her mind. “It won’t hold up for long,” she added, as another hit rocked the ship. “But maybe it’ll last long enough.”

Nursing all the speed out of the freighter she could, but still painfully aware it wasn’t enough, Taryn drove for the distant safety of the *Hopes* bulbous bulk. Lured into finishing off the tempting target, the cruiser followed.

It followed too far.

Just when the shields’ diagnostic message was scrolling past in red again and Taryn despaired of lasting much longer, suddenly, they were there.

The *Hope's* turbolaser punch was joined by two other Mon Cal cruisers, and the Carrack cruiser abruptly gave up the chase as its commander realized they'd strayed within firing range of the New Republic fleet. Flames danced along scorched sections of its port side, and a small explosion briefly illuminated the hull above one of its dorsal exhaust ports. Apparently deciding retreat was the prudent course of action, the cruiser banked away, its powerful sublight engines driving for deep space.

But it wasn't fast enough.

The brilliant flare from the exploding cruiser lit up the *Messenger's* canopy. Out her port window, Taryn caught a glimpse of fast-moving specks—X-wings, returning to escort formation around the fleet after pumping deadly proton torpedoes into the ship's damaged areas. The fireball began to fade as she approached the *Hope's* hangar bay.

Behind her, Bremen was silent. Cycling back the repulsors and gently setting the ship down on the deck, Taryn waited expectantly for a critique.

"You didn't tell me we had extra shields," he said instead.

"You didn't ask."

"Yes, well—" He hesitated so long that Taryn half-turned to look up at him. The habitual frown was still there, but his eyes were direct as he admitted, "When the main generator went, I figured we were done for."

"We almost were," she said. "Credit my father—he's the one who taught me how to get things up and running on practically nothing but hope and air. After Coruscant, I thought we could use an extra set of shields."

"They certainly came in handy," Bremen agreed. He paused again, even longer this time. "Look," he finally said, "I know I objected to you two being on this mission, but ... all in all, it's worked out okay."

*Okay?* Taryn stared at him, disconcerted. They'd been shot at, yanked out of hyperspace and boarded, and had eluded an

Imperial cruiser to successfully deliver the datacard. Was this his idea of a compliment?

Bremen flushed slightly at her expression, but added, “We’re always looking for good pilots, and if you’ve a mind for a career change, the New Republic could use someone like you.”

She didn’t know what to say.

“Think about it,” he said. “I’ll leave you some contacts to get in touch with, if you’re interested. You, too,” he told Del.

“Not me,” Del said. “I’m retirin’.”

Taryn glanced at him in surprise. That’s right; after 30 years of hauling mail to the same old ports along the same old route, once they finished this run his piloting days were done.

Was that really what she wanted to look forward to?

“Thanks for the offer,” she told Bremen. “I’ll think about it. But right now, I’ve got a route to finish. Not to mention, figure a course back to Coriallis.”

Bremen leaned over Del’s shoulder. “This ought to help,” he said, punching up a chart on the nav computer. Before leaving, he handed her a datacard and urged again, “Think about it.”

As Taryn cleared the *Hope*’s hangar bay and headed toward the first of a short series of hyperspace hops that would take them back to the Core, she tried to imagine what her father would say if she gave up delivering mail and started flying for the New Republic instead.

Would he say something patronizing—or would he be pleased? She considered it a minute, then shrugged. Gazing out at the stars, she realized she no longer cared what he said.

Taryn smiled as she pulled back the levers and the stars streaked, then faded to the swirling sky of hyperspace. She was back on course.

# **A Certain Point of View**

## **by Charlene Newcomb**

Heh, heh, Lieutenant, I think he's got you this time!" engineer Dap Nechel chuckled.

Lieutenant Celia Durasha ran her hand along the barrel of her blaster and glanced at Nechel. She knew how much the short, bearded alien enjoyed these ritual matchups between the *Kuari Princess'* navigator and Detien Kaileel, the security chief. Their banter enlivened the luxury liner's routine passage along the Relgim Run between Endoraan and Mantooine.

"Just wait a minute now, Dap," she said, holstering the blaster and leaning across the holo gameboard to study her farangs and waroots. Celia frowned, her emerald-green eyes narrowed. The chiefs last move had indeed given him the advantage.

Seated across from her, Security Chief Kaileel wore a grin—at least Celia thought she detected a grin. The Kabieroun's long snout hid most of his mouth.

"Come now, my dear crimson-haired friend," Kaileel said, his Basic heavily accented, "shall we try another game?" Dark intelligent eyes twinkled, reflecting the yellowish-green light of

the gameboard. He sat back, his giant frame obscuring the overstuffed pillows that decorated the sofas on the *Kuari Princess*' observation deck.

Shaking her head, Celia rolled her eyes. "Why is it, Dap," she kidded the engineer, "that I seem to lose every time you're around?"

Dap smiled at her mischievously, then winked at Kaileel. "I bring the Chief good luck!"

"I don't think I'm going to invite you to any more games!" Celia laughed, falling back onto the sofa. Sighing, she stared out the viewport at the mottled lights of stars rushing past them as the ship travelled through hyperspace. "Wish I had time for another game, Chief. We'll be coming up on Mantooine soon, and I'm supposed to be on the bridge."

Chief Kaileel nodded, muscles rippling along his elongated neck. "I imagine the captain would appreciate the presence of his best officers at their respective duty stations."

"Indeed," Dap agreed.

"I'll have some free time after we make orbit. Shall we get together, say, at 1930?" Celia asked.

"No good," the Chief replied. "I have some things to take care of on Mantooine. I won't be back until much later."

"Things to take care of, eh?" Celia kidded him, picking up her nav-aid datapad from the seat. "All right, Chief, when do I get to meet this new girlfriend you've been harboring on Mantooine?"

"And what about the ones on Aris and Vykos?" Dap added.

Kaileel blushed a darker shade of green than normal and straightened in his seat. "No girlfriends," he told them, tugging at the earhoop hanging from his left lobe. "Just ... friends."

"Okay, if you say so," Celia replied, a sly smile tugging at the corner of her lip. Standing up, she brushed a stray red hair off the silky white sleeve of her uniform and carefully adjusted the blaster holstered around her hips. "Well, time for work, gentlebeings."

Dap took one last gulp of his drink and bounced down from the sofa. “Ah, yes,” he said, “an engineer’s work is never done. *Vetoosh*, friends.”

“*Vetoosh*” Celia replied as Dap headed down the corridor. “Chief K?”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Any progress on finding those missing blasters?”

Kaileel swung his massive head. “No,” he said. “I’m afraid the captain will be unhappy with my report. I’ve been over this a dozen times with my security people. It’s hard to believe one of them might be lying. But this is the third incident. All those blasters were in secure lockers in our offices. I just don’t see how anyone else could have taken them.”

“And they haven’t turned up anywhere on the ship?”

“I’ve had scanning teams searching every centimeter of the *Princess*, though I don’t expect to find them here,” he said. “No, I’m afraid this last batch may have been smuggled off the ship at one of our port stops and will turn up in Rebel hands like those the Imperials discovered on Mantooine.”

“You sound worried, Chief,” Celia observed.

“This will not look good on my record, Lieutenant,” Kaileel reminded her.

“Chief, your record is impeccable!” she told him. “You’ve got the best security team this side of the Rim!”

“With a dozen weapons missing?” he grimaced. “Thank you for your vote of confidence, little Crimson.”

Nodding, Celia watched him rise, his huge form towering far above hers. “I’ll talk with you when you return from Mantooine.” She started to walk away, then turned back to face him. “I want my rematch!” she called. “You’re not going to win again!”

The decks were crowded with passengers boarding the *Kuari Princess* in Mantooine for the return trip through the Maelstrom Nebula to Endoraan. Celia nodded politely to a group of

Ithorians and three Corellian businessmen. She smiled at a young couple, still dressed in their wedding finery. Obviously on their honeymoon, they didn't seem to notice anything around them, only each other.

"Ticket, please," hostess Kelsa Vilrein asked a very wealthy-looking female passenger.

"Miss," the woman asked, "can you tell me where the observation deck is? I don't want to miss our entry into the Maelstrom. I've heard so much about it."

"That's on the Lido Deck," Kelsa told her. "The captain will announce our approach. Of course, you realize we won't enter the Maelstrom for 15 hours."

"Yes, thank you, my dear."

Kelsa tipped her head toward Celia. "Good evening, Lieutenant."

"How are you, Kelsa?" Celia asked the dark-haired woman.

"Ticket, please," she replied, glancing down to check another passenger's accommodations. "Homthor Deck. That's up two levels." She winked at Celia. "I'm fine, Lieutenant."

"Has Chief Kaileel come back on board?" Celia asked.

"He returned about a half hour ago. Ticket, please."

"Thanks, Kelsa."

"Celia?"

The voice was familiar, but one she hadn't heard in a long time. Looking around, Celia stared wide-eyed. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Adion? How in the worlds—"

"I'd recognize that red mane anywhere!" he exclaimed, reaching out to take her hand. "Celia Durasha. Good skies! What are you doing so far from Lankashiir?"

"I'm the *Kuari Princess*' navigator. And look at you—"

"What do you think?" he asked, tugging at his tunic to straighten any part of the uniform that might dare to be out of place.

"Lieutenant ... hm," she said, eyeing his tall muscular frame. Adion Lang looked more handsome than she remembered. Maybe it's the uniform, she thought. "I like it."

"Celia, you look absolutely ravishing," he told her.

"Shh!" she replied, turning her head as the heat rose in her cheeks. "You're not allowed to embarrass the ship's navigator."

"All right, I'll try not to."

"I'm good friends with the Security Chief, Lieutenant Lang. Any misbehavior and I'll have him throw you in the brig!"

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned. "You haven't changed at all, Celia."

"Not one little bit!" she laughed. "Now, c'mon. Let's get out of the line of traffic." Leading him through the ship's corridors toward the observation deck, Celia couldn't help but notice the two white-armored shadows that followed them at a discreet distance. "Friends of yours?" she asked.

Adion glanced back. "Oh, them? Don't worry about them. Just a couple of guards who were lucky enough to accompany me," he replied nonchalantly. "Tell me, Celia, how long has it been?"

She thought for a moment. "Seven years, I guess."

"A long time," he said. "Tell me about you, your family. I'm afraid I've lost touch with your brothers."

"Well, Jak is still in the Navy, stationed on board the *Relentless*. Bern is a lieutenant with an armored battalion in the Generis Sector, and I just spoke with Raine last week. His unit was preparing to ship out to Ralltiir—some kind of local trouble, I suppose. I miss them all terribly, but especially Raine."

"I guess that's natural—he is your twin brother, after all," Adion said. "But what happened to all your grand plans? I thought you would attend the Academy like your brothers."

Celia frowned, unable to ignore the incoming tide of emotions that were attached to that subject.

Adion stopped in the middle of the corridor, obviously aware that he'd touched on a sore spot. "I'm sorry," he told her, taking her hand into his. "I can tell something's wrong."



"It's okay," Celia said as old feelings of anger flooded her senses. "My application was never forwarded past Sector."

"What! Who would do such a thing?"

Staring past Adion, her voice trembled, full of bitterness. "Commander Reise Durasha."

"Your father?"

Nodding, Celia walked away from Adion. She ran her hand along the gold handrail that lined the ornately decorated corridor.

"But why?" Adion asked, taking two giant strides to catch up with her.

She stopped, planting her arms across her chest, and looked him straight in the eye. "I believe his words were, 'No daughter of mine is going to attend the Academy. It's no place for women,' or something to that effect."

Adion lowered his eyes, shuffling his feet on the ship's polished marble flooring. His silence stung louder than a thunderclap.

"You, too? You agree with him?" she asked, trying to temper her anger and hurt.

"Celia, you would have been remarkable at the Academy. But do you know where most women end up after graduation?"

She glared at him. She knew all right. Backwater worlds, crummy assignments, with little chance to prove yourself, or to ever see a promotion. But it never mattered to her. She had longed to wear the uniform, to proudly serve as others in her family had done for generations.

"Your father was only thinking of your well-being," Adion said.

"My well-being? Excuse me, why would he be so concerned about a daughter he barely knew?"

"And yet you wanted to follow in his footsteps! See your family every three or four years, if it was convenient? Celia," he admonished her gently, "how can you still be upset with him after all these years?"

"He interfered with my life, Adion. He had no right to make that decision for me."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Can we drop this subject?" she asked. "You haven't told me what you're doing on the *Kuari Princess*."

Adion looped his arm through hers. "Show me your ship," he said, "and I'll tell you about my assignment to Aris."

"Aris? Sector HQ, eh?" she smiled, leading him up the grand staircase to the Lido observation deck. "I'm impressed. A plush job, no doubt."

"You are looking at the new assistant to the Moff," he told her.

"Congratulations, Adion! That's wonderful." She stopped, turning to look out one of the viewports. Mantooine loomed ahead of them, the glare of sunlight illuminating the horizon as the ship's orbit took them across the terminator into day. "It's so beautiful up here," she sighed. "But just wait until we enter the Maelstrom Nebula."

"I've heard about it," he said, his voice softening. "But it can't be as spectacular as the lovely red hair I used to tug on from my seat in physics classes." He pushed a loose curl away from her face then touched her lightly on the cheek. "I've missed you, Celia."

Celia blushed and looked away from him. Adion reached out to turn her face back toward his. Putting his arm around her waist, he pulled her close. Slowly, his lips met hers. For a brief moment neither one noticed the curious on-lookers who passed by.

Trembling, Celia pulled away from him. Old memories rushed in upon her senses. There may have been a time, years ago, when she would have followed him to the ends of the galaxy. But then he'd left their homeworld to attend Raithal Academy and she hadn't seen or heard from him in all these years. Did he expect to pick up right where they'd left off?

Her eyes fixed on his. There was something different about him, something in those piercing blue eyes that she couldn't quite put her finger on. "I've got to go, Adion. We'll be leaving orbit soon and I'm supposed to be on duty now."

"May I see you later?" he asked.

"I—I'll check with you in the morning," she said, turning to leave.

Confused by emotions he'd stirred deep within her, emotions she thought she'd left behind in the past, Celia hurried away. She needed time to think. Some safe harbor. And she knew exactly where to find it.

The door slid open into a modestly decorated office. A hologram on one wall displayed a cross section of the *Kuari Princess*. A dozen monitors occupied another wall to the right of a desk that was littered with a half dozen datacards.

Chief Kaileel was hunched over his computer terminal. He glanced up at Celia, a momentary look of annoyance vanished quickly, replaced by a gentler expression.

"Good evening, dear Crimson. May I help you with something?"

"I, uh, thought I'd get a brief update on those missing blasters, Chief," she said unconvincingly.

Kaileel's large dark eyes frowned at her over the top of the monitor. "I have nothing new to report, Lieutenant," he replied, eyeing her suspiciously. "Was there something else I might help you with?"

Celia's eyes wandered around the room. "I've got the bridge watch for another hour, then I'll be ready for our rematch."

Kaileel drummed his long green fingers on the desk. "It is rather late, you realize."

"You're not trying to get out of this game, are you?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. I shall be off duty in two hours."

“Good,” Celia replied, glad she’d have the game to keep her mind off a certain handsome Imperial lieutenant. “Then I’ll expect you to meet me on the observation deck.”

The edges of Kaileel’s mouth curled upward behind his snout. “Oh, my dear little crimson-haired friend, I would not miss the chance to beat you again for all the spice on Kessel!”

“Beat me?” she smiled, her mood suddenly lighter. “Don’t count on it, Chief!”

“Get to your bridge, little one. Drive your ship! Steer us a straight course!”

Leaning over the desk, Celia’s face grew serious. “You look tired, Chief,” she said. “Is everything all right?”

Kaileel leaned back into his chair. “Yes—well, no,” he admitted when he saw the frown on her face. “I had some disturbing news on my visit to Mantooine.”

“Chief?” another voice called from the doorway. “Sorry to interrupt, Lieutenant.”

“What is it, Raban?” Kaileel asked the security officer as Celia walked behind the desk to stare out the viewport.

“We’ve got a report of a fight between two passengers at the Galleria Shop.”

“Who’s on it?”

“Brankton. And we’ve sent in a backup.”

“Keep me posted,” Kaileel told the man, then turned to smile at Celia. “This may turn out to be an exciting cruise.”

“We haven’t even left orbit yet!” Celia marvelled.

“And you thought your job was interesting.”

“Chief, what were you about to tell me—the news you got on Mantooine?”

“Later, my dear. I’ll tell you later.”

Celia eyed her old friend. There was something bothering him. But before she could probe for more information the captain’s voice sounded over the intercom. “Chief Kaileel, is Lieutenant Durasha with you?”

“Yes, Captain,” Kaileel said.

"I was just on my way to the bridge, sir," Celia added.

"Lieutenant, I need to speak with you privately. Will you meet me in my office right away?"

"Of course, sir. On my way. I wonder what that's all about," she said as Kaileel clicked off the intercom. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Chief."

"Captain Glidrick, you wanted to see me?"

"Please, Lieutenant, sit down," he said. Stenn Glidrick was a middle-aged man with brownish hair that was just beginning to streak with gray. Like Celia, he was dressed in blue trousers with a gold stripe down each leg. Medals decorated his white tunic—a reminder to everyone of his service in the Imperial Navy.

"What is it, sir? What's happened?"

"I received a message from your father—"

Celia stood up abruptly, her face reddening. "My father sent you a message?" she asked, the anger in her voice unmistakable.

"Please, Lieutenant—"

"I want nothing to do with him—"

"Lieutenant Durasha, sit down!" the captain ordered. He took a deep breath. "Your father sent word through me, because he knew what your reaction would be. It's about your brother—"

Celia paled. "What?" Her hands trembled as she grasped the edge of Glidrick's desk and collapsed into the chair.

"He's been killed," the captain told her. "I'm sorry."

Closing her eyes, Celia chewed on the inside of her lip, trying to force back the tears. "Captain, I have three brothers. Which one—"

Glidrick glanced down at the datapad. "It's Raine," he said. "Your father said there are more details on this holo that accompanied the message I received. Take all the time you need, Celia. I'm truly sorry."

"Thank you, sir," Celia replied numbly, taking the holo from him. She rose slowly from the chair and somehow managed to

find her way to her quarters. Alone, Celia listened to the message. When it ended, she paused it, staring at her father's frozen holo image. The small room seemed to close in around her.

Unconsciously, Celia ran her hand back and forth across her holster, then downward, brushing against her soft leather boot. She unsheathed the knife hidden there. It had been a special gift from Raine, one he had given to her the night before he'd left for his last term of service. Sitting beneath Lankashiir's star-filled skies, they had reminisced about the good times they'd had exploring the forests of their homeworld.

She turned the knife over several times. Light from the holo image touched the steel gray blade and cascaded across the desk. Her small hand melded perfectly around its handle which was carved from rare ebon. She studied the flaming red jewel embedded just above the blade, watched it sparkle brilliantly even in the dimly lit cabin.

Good memories seemed no more than a distant echo now. Celia set the knife down, rubbed her hand wearily across her brow and clicked on her father's message again.

"Your brother Raine has been killed by Rebel forces on the planet Ralltiir," the figure in the holo said. Reise Durasha looked much older, and much thinner than when she'd seen him last. His gray-green Imperial Army uniform seemed to hang loosely on his bent frame. Dark shadows ringed his eyes. "I know how close you and Raine were ..."

Celia buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Emotionally exhausted, numb with grief, sleep finally ended her pain. When the cabin intercom buzzed more than an hour later, she awoke suddenly. Slowly, she reached over and clicked it on.

"Durasha here," she said wearily.

"Celia, I thought we had a game this evening."

She stared blankly at the comm panel.

"Celia?" the Chief called again, more insistently.

"Oh, Chief," she finally said, "I forgot."

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "We don't have to play tonight—"

"No, just give me a few minutes."

When Celia arrived on the observation deck, the holo gameboard was darkened. A tall glass of some exotic beverage sat on the edge of the playing table.

"What's this?" Celia asked, pointing toward the drink.

"Zadarian brandy. You sounded like you could use a good stiff drink," Kaileel told her.

Celia blinked a tear from her eye. She picked up the brandy, swirled it around the glass thoughtfully, and finally took a long sip. The brew trickled down her throat, but its warmth did nothing to diminish the chill she felt. She could feel the Chief's eyes upon her.

"What has happened?" he asked.

Staring out at the stars blurring past them in hyperspace, Celia didn't seem to hear him.

"Celia?" He stood up, placing his hand lightly on her shoulder.

Trembling, Celia turned toward Kaileel and looked up into his eyes. "My brother—" she cried, burying her face in his chest.

Kaileel wrapped his long scaly arms around her. He held her tightly. "I'm so sorry, my dear little Crimson," he said.

When her tears dried, Celia told her old friend how Raine's unit had been ambushed by Rebels at the spaceport on Ralltiir.

Kaileel shook his head sadly. "So many will die," he said quietly. "On both sides."

Celia's eyes grew wide. "You don't support the Rebel cause, do you?"

"Let's just say I disagree with the Empire's methods of resolving this conflict," he told her.

"What do you mean, Chief?"

Kaileel gazed out the viewport. "Think of the Maelstrom Nebula, Celia," he said.

"What about it?"

"From Mantooine—how does it appear?"

"It's barely a speck," she replied. "True," he nodded. "What happens when we enter the Nebula?"

She threw him a puzzled look. "Is this a class in astrophysics, Chief?"

"Please, follow along with me," he said.

"All right. When we enter the Nebula our communications don't work well. And our sensors are blinded. But what does that have to do with—"

Kaileel held up one long green finger. "From a great distance we can only surmise the hazards the Nebula may present to us. Why is it that until we're close, until it touches us, we don't recognize the danger?"

"The Empire is like that, little Crimson. From a distance, we may not feel the danger—we're too far removed from its touch. But once it is upon us, we will hear and see only what the Empire desires."

"My family serves that Empire, Chief. My brother died fighting for it, too," she reminded him. "You'd better not let others hear you speak like this. They might suspect you were the one who stole those—" She stopped mid-sentence, sitting up abruptly, and leaned over the holo gameboard.

Kaileel eyed her, then thoughtfully swirled the reddish liqueur in his own glass.

"You gave those blasters to Rebels on Mantooine?" she asked quietly. "Was *that* the business you had to attend to?"

Before the Chief could answer, Dap Nechel bounded into the room.

"Why didn't you tell me you were playing?" he asked, his voice filled with an exaggerated anguish.

Celia fell back onto the overstuffed pillows. She looked from Kaileel to Dap, then turned away. Kaileel straightened in his seat and took a long slow sip from his drink.

"I'm sorry," Dap said. "I seem to have interrupted a private conversation. I'll go now."



“No, it’s okay, Dap,” Celia said. “Stay. We were just setting up the board.” She pressed a button on the side of the game table. A greenish glow lit their faces and a dozen warriors appeared, standing at attention, weapons held at right-shoulder arms, on each side of the holo board.

“Celia, we don’t have to play—” Kaileel began.

“It’s all right, Chief,” she said. “Your move.”

As Dap climbed onto the sofa next to Celia, Kaileel positioned his waroot. Celia moved one of her farangs. Chief countered by advancing another one of his warriors.

Celia studied the gameboard. Sitting up, she pulled her blaster from its holster and rubbed her hand along the barrel contemplatively. “Hmm, Chief,” she said, “that was not a wise move.”

“Really? I believe it all depends on your point of view,” he replied.

“My point of view?” she frowned.

“Open your eyes, dear Crimson. Look at what is happening all around you.”

Dap eyed his two friends. “What are you two talking about?” he asked. “Will one of you please tell me?”

Celia looked away.

“Celia’s brother was killed by Rebels on Ralltiir.”

“Oh, dear. That’s terrible, Lieutenant. I had heard about the insurrection there on the holo newsvid. But the Empire is dealing with those Rebels,” he said. “And the ones on Alderaan. Yes, indeed. They won’t be giving the Empire any more trouble.”

“Alderaan?” the Chief asked.

“Good skies, have you not heard the news—well, no, I guess not if you’ve been sitting here the last hour.”

“What has happened on Alderaan?” Celia repeated.

“The Emperor’s servants discovered that several of the leaders of the Rebellion were from Alderaan—Bail Organa himself, and his daughter, the Princess Leia. Our forces have made an example of that world.”

“What do you mean?”

“Alderaan has been destroyed.”

“What!” Celia exclaimed.

Kaileel shook his head sadly. “Did I not tell you this?”

“The whole planet?”

“It’s nothing but billions of particles of dust now,” Dap said.

“Millions of people, like pawns,” Kaileel said, pointing at the characters on their gameboard, “for the Emperor to do with what he will.”

“But, Chief—”

“I fear the game is up,” Kaileel said softly.

Frowning, Celia leaned over the gameboard to check their warriors’ positions. “You’re not giving up that easily,” she said, suddenly catching Dap’s startled expression out of the corner of her eye.

Chief Kaileel exhaled deeply, letting out a big sigh. Celia looked up. Two stormtroopers had blaster rifles aimed at her friend.

“Indeed, Rebel spy,” Adion Lang’s voice rang out menacingly. He stepped out from behind the stormtroopers. “The game is up.”

“Adion!” Celia exclaimed, carefully holstering her blaster. “What’s the meaning of this?” She made a point of standing slowly, not wanting to alarm the storm-troopers. “Chief Kaileel is no spy.”

“Please, Celia, don’t try to defend this traitor. We know all about this,” he paused, searching for the right description, “creature’s activities. We have proof that he has supplied weapons to Rebel agents on Mantooine. And considering the conversation I’ve just overheard—”

“You’ve been spying on us!” Dap exclaimed.

“That is my job. I’m sorry, Celia, that this ... thing ... has cultivated your friendship. Just remember what *his* friends have done to your brother,” Adion said. “Raine would still be alive if it weren’t for traitors like him.”

His cold words cut into Celia's heart like a vibroblade. She'd lost her brother to the Rebels. And now she was losing her best friend to the Empire. She looked at Kaileel—she would never blame him for Raine's death. She hoped he could see that in her eyes.

"It's all right, dear Crimson," Kaileel told her. "I am only one. But the Empire will soon learn that the ones will multiply by the hundreds of thousands. And one day, we shall not be put down."

"Take him away," Adion ordered the stormtroopers.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," Dap said. "If you'll not be needing me, may I go?"

"Yes, Chief Nechel," Adion told him, "though I may ask for a statement from you later."

"I see," Dap replied. "Yes, indeed, whatever you require. You know where I'll be."

Celia watched them put binders on Kaileel's wrists. His strong muscular arms twitched nervously as he stood up. Towering above them, he would have been an intimidating sight if it weren't for the blaster rifles they had trained on him.

"Move it," one stormtrooper ordered Kaileel, shoving his rifle into the chief's chest.

"Take him to ship's security and keep a close eye on him, Sergeant," Adion ordered. "Remember, he knows that place better than anyone on this ship."

"Yes, sir."

As they led Kaileel away, Celia stared after them. "What will happen to him, Adion?"

"Dear Celia, don't concern yourself with these details," he replied, reaching out to take her hand.

"I don't understand this, Adion. I thought you were an administrative aide."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry I had to lie to you, Celia. I'm with the Imperial Security Bureau. We've been watching your security chief for several months now."

"I thought I knew him so well. I never suspected—" she said, covering her face with her hands.

Adion took Celia into his arms. "There, now," he said, "everything will be all right. Come, sit down with me."

"Gentlebeings," a voice rang out over the ship's intercom. "This is Captain Glidrick. In approximately 30 minutes, the *Kuari Princess* will emerge from hyperspace to enter the Maelstrom Nebula. You won't want to miss the spectacular view from the Lido Deck's observation ports. It will be a sight you will never forget."

"The Nebula—" Celia sighed. Kaileel's comparison of the Empire and the nebula filled her mind ... *until it touches you, you may not realize the danger it presents.*

"Forget what that old creature said to you, Celia. His thoughts are dangerous."

Celia looked up into Adion's blue eyes. They seemed cold and vacant. Who was right? Empire? Rebel? She'd been hurt by both of them. Could she ever embrace one or the other? She didn't know what to think anymore. "I've got to talk to him, Adion."

"That's not a good idea, Celia."

"Please—just for a few minutes."

"I will have to question him first, but before we reach Aris I'll let you see him."

Nodding weakly, she rested her head on Adion's shoulder.

The cell door slid shut behind her. Celia stood rigidly, staring at Kaileel. After more than 10 hours, she was finally able to talk to him, just as Adion Lang had promised.

Shaking her head, she placed her nav-aid datapads on the chest just inside the door and began pacing back and forth across Kaileel's cell. Her hand nervously fingered her empty holster.

"You admitted it!" she finally shouted at Kaileel.

"What else was I to do, Lieutenant?" he asked her.

Stopping dead in her tracks in front of him, Celia rolled her eyes in disgust. "Lie!"

Kaileel stared past her as if looking out some nonexistent viewport. "To what end? My dear little Crimson," he said, turning to look into her eyes, "I know you are not that naive."

Celia clenched her fists and pounded Kaileel's muscular chest. "I just don't understand, Chief!" she cried. "What has the Empire done to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you get yourself mixed up with these Rebels?"

"What the Empire is doing is wrong," he told her, "it's immoral. Remember what I told you—that certain point of view—stop looking at the Empire from a distance. Take a look up close, Celia. You will see. All freedom-loving beings know this is true." He took her hand into his, pressing it closely to his chest. "And I know, deep in my heart, that one day you will understand."

Staring up into his huge black eyes, Celia pushed down the lump in her throat. "I just don't know, Chief—"

The door into the cell slid open.

"Time's up, Lieutenant. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"But it's only been a couple of minutes. Can't I stay a little while longer, Sergeant?"

"I've got my orders, Lieutenant."

The stormtrooper motioned her toward the door. Celia frowned at Kaileel. She finally walked away from him, stopping to glance back one last time.

"I still want my rematch with you, Chief!" she told him, reaching for the datapads on the chest. "I won't let them take you off this ship until I get a rematch!"

The datapads slipped from Celia's hands, clattering to the floor. She bent down to retrieve them, inconspicuously withdrawing the knife from her boot. Standing abruptly, she drove the knife under the stormtrooper's helmet and into his neck. He screamed in pain as she forcefully pulled him out of the

doorway, bashing his head against the wall. Her hands shaking, she twisted the blade one last time as the trooper collapsed to the floor.

“C’mon, Chief,” she said, re-sheathing the knife in her boot, “we’ve got to get out of here!”

A second stormtrooper appeared in the doorway. Diving to the floor, Celia recovered the fallen trooper’s blaster rifle and opened fire. Her shot nicked the wall as the stormtrooper backed away from the door. Jumping to her feet, Celia scrambled to the doorway and blasted him as he ran down the corridor.

“Let’s go, Chief!” she shouted, throwing the blaster rifle back to him.

Following her, Kaileel stepped over the two dead stormtroopers. “Tell me, dear Crimson, do you really expect us to get out of here alive?” he asked. “Where’s the rest of our security people?”

“Dap arranged for a little problem on the Bazaar Deck,” she said, retrieving the second blaster rifle.

“Good old Dap. You think the turbolift’s the best way down to the hangar bay?”

“Should be all clear, Chief.”

“Amazing.”

“You’ve got a lot of friends on board the *Princess*, old man!”

“Is there a barge—”

“Already prepped. I disconnected the robot pilot and did a little rewiring so I could fly it out of here.”

“And into the Maelstrom,” the Chief added. “We’ll be safe there.”

Thirty seconds later the turbolift doors opened onto the luxury liner’s dimly lit hangar. Two barges which were used for piloting passengers to and from the ship occupied the high-ceilinged room. Peering into the bay, Celia motioned for Kaileel to follow her.

They were halfway across the bay when Adion Lang walked down the ramp of the nearest barge. His blaster was pointed toward Chief Kaileel, but his eyes were transfixed on Celia.

“Put your blasters down,” he ordered them.

Celia stared at the blaster in her hand. “Adion, please,” she said, her voice trembling, “let Kaileel go.”

“I was afraid you’d try something like this, Celia. You always were rather impetuous. But I think you know I can’t let him go,” he told her. “Now, please, put your blaster down. You don’t want to kill me.”

Celia searched Adion’s eyes. There was no emotion there, no spark of life. It can’t end like this, she thought. *There’s got to be something I can do.*

Chief Kaileel moved slowly to lower his blaster. “I’m sorry, little Crimson,” he said, suddenly jerking the rifle up to fire at Adion. His first shot went wide. Half a heartbeat later, a blast from Adion’s rifle caught him across the chest. Kaileel managed to get off a second shot, but it ricocheted wildly, bouncing off the hull of the barge. Kaileel collapsed, mortally wounded, onto the cold metallic floor of the hangar bay.

Celia dropped her blaster rifle and rushed toward her fallen friend. “You didn’t have to kill him!” she screamed at Adion. Tears threatened to blur her vision. But she forced them away as she knelt beside Kaileel’s body.

Adion approached her cautiously, kicking both blaster rifles across the hangar floor. “Why, Celia? Why were you helping him escape?” he asked her. “You’re no Rebel.”

“He was my friend,” she said quietly, ignoring the contempt she heard in Adion’s voice. She wondered what had happened to the young man she’d once admired, the man she had loved.

“You’ll have to come with me, Celia,” Adion said.

“Don’t make me, Adion,” she told him, her eyes still fixed on Kaileel’s body for fear they might betray her true feelings. “Won’t you let me leave?”

"It's my duty, Celia," he said coldly, his blaster trained on the back of her head. "You're under arrest for treasonous acts against the Empire."

Celia picked up Kaileel's limp hand, tenderly running her fingers across it. "Looks like this game's going nowhere, Chief," she told him. "How will I ever get my rematch?"

Adion moved a step closer, his tall frame casting a dark shadow across Kaileel's face. His leg brushed up against Celia's back and she cringed at his touch.

"Get up, Celia."

A tear trickled down her cheek. Slowly, she turned and looked back at Adion. Her hand slipped unnoticeably toward her boot. Her fingers clamped around the handle of the knife.

"Get up," Adion repeated, grabbing her left arm, dragging her up so that their faces were barely centimeters apart. He shook his head, and for one brief moment Celia thought she detected a hint of regret. Then his blue eyes narrowed. Blinded by his own hatred, Adion never noticed the flash of steel until Celia slashed him across the arm.

His eyes grew wild as he cried out in pain. The blaster slipped from his hand and skittered across the floor as Celia lashed out again. Trying to protect himself from the attack, Adion lost his grip on her. She fled across the hangar and up the ramp of the barge.

As the hatch slid shut she could hear Adion shouting her name. "Celia, don't do this!"

Seconds later, the barge lifted off the floor of the hangar bay. The small transport slipped quietly outside into the swirling Maelstrom Nebula.

From the viewport, Celia watched the *Kuari Princess* fade as the barge moved away from the luxury liner and deeper into the nebula.

"Stalemate, Chief," she nodded to herself. A bitterness crept into her voice. "Nobody wins this round."



# **Blaze of Glory**

## **by Tony Russo**

Every mercenary wants to be remembered.” Lex “Mad Vornskr” Kempo paused a moment as the jungle browns and greens of Gabredor III rose up toward their diving freighter. With a sardonic smirk, the spacer twisted around in the pilot’s seat and gazed at Brixie.

“A mercenary doesn’t retire gracefully. There’s no such thing as an Old Mercs Home either. What a real mercenary wants is to go out ... in a blaze of glory.”

“Really?” Brixie Ergo shifted around nervously in one of the acceleration chairs situated behind the co-pilot’s station. Space was tight in the modified Corellian light freighter, especially up front. The craft rattled and shook as the vessel plunged deeper into the planet’s atmosphere. Kempo smiled a toothy, wicked grin.

“Absolutely.”

What sounded like a cross between an order and snarl came from the fur-covered being currently occupying the co-pilot’s seat beside Kempo.

“Leave the rook alone.” Sully Tigereye was a Trunsk, a stout alien species well known for their fighting ability and equally legendary short temper. Bristly brown hairs covered the length of Tigereye’s body except for his face and the palms of his hands. As if emphasizing his displeasure with Kempo, two shiny, sharpened tusks protruded from his lower lip. Brixie recalled stories her parents had told her as a child, about Trunks being the showpieces of many a carnival show as gladiators and ring fighters.

If Sully Tigereye had ever been part of such a show in the past, he never let on. What she did know was that he had once been a highly decorated member of an elite New Republic infiltrator unit. No longer with the New Republic military, he continued to serve with his former colonel in a band of mercenaries called the Red Moons. It was Tigereye who had been appointed as team leader for this mission, and it was Tigereye who had chosen Brixie to come along as combat medic, although it was for a mission that Brixie still did not quite understand. Just sitting close by Lex Kempo and Sully Tigereye made the former medical student uncomfortable, as if she was part of a group she did not truly belong to.

The mercenaries’ target was a Karazak Slavers Guild operation lurking in the jungle swamps and dense foliage on Gabredor III. Like the few Red Moon operation files she had a chance to study during her training period, any further information on the exact target and their reason for assaulting it would not be explained in detail until they landed. That protected not only the Red Moons, but those who hired them. All of this secrecy just didn’t make any sense to Brixie. What could they hope to accomplish against an entire camp of slavers? Who thought up this brilliant strategy, anyway? Then again, she chided herself—joining a mercenary force like the Red Moons so she could find her parents was not exactly a brilliant strategy either.

Tigereye continued to berate Lex Kempo. "I didn't ask her to be part of this team to keep you entertained. Just fly this junk pile, if you don't mind."

Unlike Sully Tigereye, who looked naturally forceful yet showed a surprising concern for others, "Mad Vornskr" Kempo easily looked like he had just fallen out of a grim entertainment holo. He claimed to have served with over a dozen different private armies and militias, even a brief stint in the Imperial Army as a scout, as evident from the customized suit of scout trooper armor he wore. The normally eggshell-white armor pieces had been carefully dulled and therma-painted with a camouflage scheme that matched Gabredor's jungle environment. Extra holsters and pockets hid a variety of throwing blades, holdout blasters, power packs, grenades, medpacs, glow rods and other necessities. With his closely-cropped hair, thin blaster scar on his right cheek and gray eyes, Kempo acted a lot like the intimidating walking arsenal he appeared to be. Still, Tigereye had touched a nerve. Kempo turned defensive as the ship shook again.

"I'm just trying to let our combat medic in on the mysteries of the merc psyche, oh fearless leader."

Brixie sensed almost immediately that Tigereye simply hated that expression. The Trunsk settled for turning his baleful face on Kempo. Trunsk were not known for their cordiality, especially under stressful conditions.

"Can we have a little less talking please?" The fourth member of their group spoke up in a whiny voice. Of all who called themselves members of the Red Moons, Hugo Cutter was the last person Brixie would probably think of as a mercenary. An escapee from a psychotrauma ward maybe, but never a soldier. Cutter's hair was as wild and unpredictable as the stares that came from his eyes. Before the start of the mission, Lex Kempo had remarked to her that Hugo Cutter had once been enrolled in the prestigious Imperial Engineers Academy, only to be disbarred after he found it more interesting to blow things apart than put

them together. Then again, Kempo always did have a knack for exaggeration. Especially when he talked about himself.

The ship dipped again. Cutter, sitting beside her, inhaled sharply. She reached out a hand to calm him. Cutter reacted by clutching the satchel bag in his lap even tighter.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry,” she faltered out an apology. “I just thought ...”

“Thought what?” He began to laugh hysterically. “That I would need help from the likes of you?”

“Don’t knock it,” Kempo murmured quietly with a twisted smile.

“Quiet. All of you.” Tigereye warned as he checked the pocket navigator he carried in a special pouch as part of his weapons harness. Huge yellow eyes glanced up and caught the reflection of the Human with the unkempt hair in the forward cockpit screen. They locked on Cutter like targeters. “Especially you. Stop fidgeting. We’re almost down.” Cutter’s nervousness was wearing even his own patience thin. Their craft shook again. He closed his eyes tightly.

“You know how much I hate insertions!”

“Relax. You clutch those shaped charges any harder and you’re likely to set them off.”

“Doubtful.” The freighter dipped sharply in the thickening atmosphere of Gabredor III. He gulped. “It takes a detonator firing at triple frequency intervals to properly set off a Mesonics focalized explosive.”

“I’ll make a note,” the fur-covered Trunsk growled as he glanced over at Kempo. “How much longer till we reach the landing point?”

Kempo checked the navigational readings as they flashed by almost too quickly for Brixie to keep up. “A few more minutes. Sensor masking is holding up so far. A Z-95 patrol upstairs didn’t even bother to sniff our contrail.”

“I’ll feel better when we’re down. Brixie, get your gear ready to go.”

“Right” she tried to keep her voice steady as she unfastened her restraint harness. The freighter suddenly lost power and began a steep dive. Brixie was immediately thrown into a wailing Cutter, who was positively revolted by her close proximity. Kempo wrestled the controls back. Regaining her footing, Brixie tried to ignore Cutter’s expression and his tightly closed eyes.

“What was that?” Tigereye asked.

Kempo shook his head. All business now, he was fighting to bring the ship back under control. Red lights broke out all over the engineering panels. Alarms hooted noisily. The freighter abruptly rolled right and pitched down hard. Tigereye began flipping switches—the ship’s starboard maneuvering thrusters were not responding.

Kempo quietly cursed between clenched teeth. “Where did procurement pick up this piece of Corellian crud anyway? I’ve seen better hulks from Socorro!”

“Can you land?”

Kempo looked directly at Tigereye. “You want an honest opinion?”

Brixie could tell that, this time, Kempo was no longer joking. Systems were failing all over the vessel. Beside her, she overheard Cutter whimpering. Some mercenary he made.

Tigereye unsnapped his own seat belts. “All hands to the lifepod now! This is no drill!”

The others spilled out of their chairs, rapidly grabbing equipment and supplies in emergency order and tossing them into the lifepod. For only a moment during the chaos, Brixie found herself watching Lex Kempo almost curiously. The Corellian pathfinder was still standing before the controls of the battered, falling freighter, gesturing with his hands locked together in an odd sort of way. Perhaps it was a ritual known only to spacers and their ships, she thought. The last thing she saw before the interior lights failed was him grinning at her as he usually did. Their fates and the ship’s were about to part ways in a most violent fashion.

“Hope you signed up for the duration, Lady Brix. From now on, it gets nothing but interesting!”

Ten thousand meters later. Straight down.

“You know,” said Hugo Cutter. “If you were Han Solo or Wedge Antilles or any one of a hundred other pilots I know, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Shut up,” Lex Kempo snapped back. “I didn’t see you help land the pod.” Of course, it was difficult for the pathfinder to make an argument considering that the Red Moon assault team was dangling inside an escape pod caught in the thick canopy of Gabredor’s jungle.

“Would it help if I did this?” Brixie’s voice called from deeper inside the pod. A secondary hatch blew off, slicing vines and branches. Without means of further support, the pod fell the remaining 40 meters until it landed in the thick bough of an ancient swamp tree. Tigereye scratched his bruised head as he and the others spilled out of the pod and hit the dirt.

“No.”

Kempo was the first to pick himself up off the jungle floor. He quickly checked the small arsenal of weapons he carried. Content, he turned and mock-saluted Sully Tigereye.

“The Red Moons have landed.”

“Thanks for the update. Brixie?”

“Yes?” The rookie pulled herself over. She had joined the Red Moons only two months ago, training at a distant base with other recruits who were either disgruntled or disappointed with the New Republic’s efforts to liberate the remainder of the galaxy. Her parents, both dedicated to the medical sciences and the saving of lives, had been conscripted into military service with an Imperial faction which called itself the Pentastar Alignment. Brixie had signed on with the Red Moons as a medical technician, hoping to somehow put an end to her parents’ servitude. She was still struggling with the ill-fitting armored hat

that had been issued to her earlier by the Red Moons' procurement detail.

"Did you pull that hatch lever?"

She bit her lower lip. There were worse things one could do than to get a Trunsk angry. Uncomfortable, she resigned herself to her fate. "Yes sir, I did."

"And what did I tell you before?"

She rolled her eyes a bit. "Don't do *anything* unless you tell me to do it."

"Exactly." Figuring that he really shouldn't be angry with her, he snatched the helmet off her head and made several adjustments to the inner web straps. After a moment, the helmet fit her perfectly. "Now pay attention and stay close."

"Yes, sir!"

"And can that *sir* nonsense."

"Yes ...". Catching herself, she shrunk back to help collect equipment from the lifepod.

"Excuse me," Kempo stretched his aching frame. "You know how I hate to interrupt your instruction of the troops but ..."

At long last, Tigereye was finally irritated with his un-amusing tirade.

"What is it, Kempo?"

"Can you please direct me to the bad guys so we can fry them and find a way off this lovely vacation spot?"

"Wrong attitude. This is not some search and destroy job like the last one you botched on Dantooine. This is a search and rescue. Here are the particulars that need rescuing."

He handed Kempo a datapad. Images of two young faces appeared in full portrait and side view modes. A distinct frown formed on the pathfinder's face as Brixie also looked at the datapad screen over his shoulder.

"Kiddies. We bailed out on to this mudball just to save a couple of pups?" Kempo tossed the datapad back at Tigereye. "The colonel must have gone nuts."

“Hey!” Cutter spoke up. “Colonel Stormcaller is the last sane person left in the galaxy. I can personally vouch for that.”

“All bow. The Pirate King of Corellia has spoken,” Kempo spat sarcastically as he affixed a grenade launcher underneath the muzzle of the “procured” stormtrooper blaster rifle he carried. “So the four of us are going up against a slaver camp to yank two kids out with no ship. I’d say we’re off to a famous running Red Moon start, Tigereye.”

“Who are they? Why are they so important?” Brixie started to say “sir,” but managed to clip it off in time.

“Don’t bother,” Kempo answered as he spun a DL-18 blaster pistol around on his index finger. “Our job is not to question why. That’s what diplomats and tax collectors are for. We’re soldiers. We get paid to solve the problems their kind create. And I want you to know, Trunsk, that I intend to get paid very well for this little field trip.”

Tigereye eyed him coldly as he handed the datapad to Brixie. “Study their faces and descriptions carefully. We need them alive. And intact.”

“But we don’t have a ship. Shouldn’t we wait for a rescue pickup?” Brixie started to say.

“You’re the team medtech,” Tigereye’s gaze hardened to dynaglass. “Is anyone here injured?”

She glanced at Kempo and the expressionless Hugo Cutter. So this was the life of the mercenary, she thought sullenly. Blindly taking orders. Crawling around on an unforgiving world, enemies all around them. No relief forces. No help. No remorse. She shook her head slowly.

The shriek of a snubfighter engine high over the tree canopy suddenly broke the silence. After a tense moment, it finally passed. Creatures and other tree dwellers began to slowly hoot and call again through the dense foliage. Kempo’s expression turned grim.

“They found the crash. We better start moving.”

Tigereye immediately agreed.



“I can re-triangulate the coordinates of the slaver camp from our position here. I’ll take the point. Kempo, you take the rear. Make sure you have your survival kits and critter repellents. The slavers chose this moss rock for a reason, and that’s probably because these jungle worlds can be downright hostile. All right. Move out!”

The slave master Greezim Trentacal relaxed in his chair aboard the transport freighter *Atron’s Mistress*, fanning his face with the elaborately decorated hide of a lexiaus beast. His darkened quarters aboard the large freighter were filled with decorations and trinkets from a hundred different worlds. Trentacal sighed, letting his jowled complexion rest on his palm as he propped his head up with an elbow. A lithe, sparsely dressed Human girl moved around him, her gestures as light as the spice-laced air. She offered him a cup of wine. Annoyed, he brushed her offering away as he looked to the shadow hiding there in the darkness.

“Just how long is this going to take, Vex? You know how I hate sitting here in this humid jungle.”

In reply, a voice slithered back. “We await another shipment of slaves from the last expedition near the Rim. By dawn tomorrow, the ship should be completely filled.”

“Good,” Trentacal yawned. Details. Minor little details. The slaves down in the cargo holds of his ship were just tiny portions of merchandise compared to the credits he could be making. It was one of the problems of doing business with the Pentastar Alignment.

To suggest that the Pentastar Alignment was just another Imperial warlord faction, just another pale pretender to the mighty former Empire, was a foolish assumption. The Alignment perceived itself as the Empire reborn. Led by a Grand Moff named Arduus Kaine, the Alignment had ignored Grand Admiral Thrawn’s attempt to consolidate Imperial forces, carefully

waiting until it could mount its own campaign against the New Republic.

Unlike other warlords, the Alignment was extremely organized and well-equipped thanks to the corporates, powerful companies formerly allied with the Empire. Now that one of these corporates, specifically the PowerOn Conglomerate from Cantras Gola, was secretly threatening to bolt and join the New Republic, the Pentastar Alignment was doing everything it could to prevent it. So the Alignment had turned to the Karazak Slavers Guild to solve its New Republic problem.

How completely ironic, Trentacal mused, that the children of the Cantras Gola ambassador had been kidnapped by his slavers. The note left in their place made the ambassador's situation quite clear. As long as the ambassador held off any further talks with the New Republic, the children would remain alive. The delay would be long enough for agents from the Alignment to completely sever the ties between Cantras Gola and the New Republic. In the end, Cantras Gola would remain loyal to the Pentastar Alignment and, in turn, the Karazak Slavers Guild would continue to conduct its operations on Gabredor III unhindered.

There were some benefits to this type of business arrangement—Trentacal had decided to keep the children as payment for his work. The Alignment had no opinion on the matter; the ambassador himself would be experiencing a most unfortunate accident and be quietly replaced ... with a more reliable Alignment official.

The slave master glanced sideways at the ambassador's children chained to the cabin's far wall and admitted that they would make fine additions to his household. Still, everything had its price. What, he wondered, would be the price for keeping these two?

Trentacal motioned to the slave girl at his side and took the cup of wine from her delicate hands. His thick palms caressed her expressionless cheek. The girl had been mute since a child.

She had been among the first of the slaves he had kept for his own. He cupped his fingers under her chin and turned her head so that she could see the frightened children.

“Soon you will have others to instruct in the fine art of caring for me.”

The shadow stepped forward, barely discernible in the darkness of Trentacal’s private cabin. Trentacal watched his bodyguard and confidant, a Defel, as he stood before the stateroom’s viewports. Vex’s thick body was completely covered in layers of rippling black fur that absorbed all surrounding light. In his right hand he held a comlink close to an attentive ear, his head bobbing slightly as he listened to what sounded like little more than static. Outside the viewports lurked the tangled jungle growth of Gabredor III and the surrounding clearing that comprised the staging camp. Lookout towers armed with heavy repeating blasters rose from the jungle floor. On either side of the bulbous freighter, slaves were being led into the ship under the scrutiny of Karazak thugs. It was a fabulously efficient operation, Trentacal assured himself. After all, it was his.

“What is it, Vex?” The Defel was responsible for not only his master’s security, but for the entire slaver operation on Gabredor. When summoned to the defense of his master, very few survived to tell about his rage. Trentacal did not mind the fear surrounding his kind’s fearsome reputation either.

Vex thumbed the comlink off and turned slightly, not liking to stare too long at the pool of light that bathed his master. “One of the Z-95 patrols has spotted the wreckage of a light freighter some distance from here. The ship had come in low and fast, using some type of counter-measures to elude long-range sensors and our patrols. Whoever they were, it appears they did not want any attention.”

“Was it a ship from the New Republic?” Trentacal asked cautiously, suddenly alert.

The wraith’s eye slits narrowed as he explained. “I do not think so. They would not risk coming so deep into Alignment

territory. Doing so could mean an all-out war between them. That is something the New Republic is not willing to risk. The only way to know is to interrogate the survivors. But the main lifepod from the ship was not found in the wreckage. My trackers are still searching for it.”

Trentacal slammed a meaty fist down on the armrest of his sumptuous chair. The serving girl sprang back in terror.

“Then it must be the Alignment. They’ve crossed us!”

The black head shook slowly. “I do not think it is the Pentastar Alignment either, Master Trentacal. Their resources are vast. They have no need for small strike teams. If they wanted to, they could attack with an *Enforcer*-class picket cruiser or something similar.”

“Then who?”

Vex’s eyes slid toward the far wall and the two figures chained silently there. The slovenly slave master sharply inhaled, understanding immediately. Whoever these intruders were, they were coming for *them*.

“Vex, I think you should activate the security perimeter.”

“It has already been done, master.”

“*Ged it ob of me!*” Lex Kempo, the mercenary’s mercenary, whined like a bantha calf as he pulled at the slimy, multi-folded creature that had fallen on his head. Brixie was trying her best to pry it off with her vibro-knife. Sully Tigereye just watched them. If the situation had been different, he might have been amused.

“Get it off of him, Brixie,” the Trunsk unsheathed a combat vibro-axe from his weapons harness.

“I’m trying!”

“Can we go home now?” Hugo muttered as he sat on a dead log, tired and agitated.

“I’m sorry we’re boring you!” Kempo snapped. He had the creature by both hands and was forcibly pulling it off when the little beast whipped out a tail appendage and squirted a powdery

jet in his face. Coughing and sneezing uncontrollably, Kempo knocked Brixie into the brush. Cutter laughed.

Tigereye swore, his patience exhausted.

“That does it. Exobiology class is now over!”

Tigereye grabbed the thing by its now-extended tail and swung. The vibro-axe removed the flailing appendage. A greenish fluid squirted over everyone. The creature flopped off Kempo’s head and expired at their feet.

Humiliation forgotten, Brixie immediately snapped open her medkit and examined the grumbling pathfinder’s head for puncture marks or other lacerations that would indicate a bite. She used a water jet to clear off his face. A quick spot test of the creature’s blood revealed that it was not inherently dangerous. Unfortunately, there was little she could do for their wallowing morale. They had been trudging through the jungle for almost a day now. Tempers were as short as grenade timers.

“I feel like a droid with a bunch of haywire receptors and a bad servo creak. Thanks kid,” Kempo wiped at his face with the moisture cloth Brixie had given him. “What was that thing?”

Tigereye considered for a moment. “I don’t know, but you’re lucky it wasn’t poisonous. I suggest the next time you hear a noise, you might want to look up as well as around.” Kempo fell quiet as he poked sympathetically at the growing welt on his forehead. Cutter continued to chuckle.

Tigereye turned his ire on the squatting demolitions expert.

“I don’t recall giving any order for a rest break, Hugo.”

“Well, you guys looked so busy fooling around with that thing that I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Time’s short. You’re on point. I want you to scout ahead and make sure there aren’t any more surprises waiting for us.”

The frazzled-haired engineer pointed at his own chest, startled. “You want me to ... scout? Sully, you know I don’t scout. I blow things up into itty-bitty pieces. Everyone in the unit says I make a poor scout.”

“Consider it a valuable life lesson. Brixie’s gotta finish checking out Kempo, and someone has to watch over her.”

Hugo rose angrily to his feet, the charges still rattling around in his camo bag. He drew a blaster pistol from a holster.

“Fine, but who’s going to watch over me?”

“Enough complaining. Scoot!”

Hugo vanished over the dead log he had been sitting on, still complaining loudly as he walked off. Tigereye shook his tired, grizzled head. Removing the map pad, he checked their current coordinates with the expected slaver encampment. They should be reaching their security perimeter soon. He looked up momentarily to watch Brixie dab a medicated ointment on Kempo’s head. She was also looking at him.

“Problem?”

“No, I was just wondering,” she stumbled over her words. “I mean, everyone spends so much time arguing and insulting. You don’t act exactly like what I’ve seen. You know ... like professionals.”

She stopped, believing she had somehow completely insulted them. Now it was Kempo’s turn to laugh. Even Tigereye, surprisingly, was not offended.

“You’ve been watching too many entertainment holos, Brixie. Not all of us pretend to be the master merc like Kempo.”

“Who’s pretending?” Kempo interrupted, still rinsing his eyes. “Don’t let our sparring fool you any, kid. We go back a long way. Far enough back to hate each other’s guts and still be the best of chums.”

“Hugo’s your best friend?” Brixie looked confused. “But you don’t act like best friends.”

Tigereye pursed his lips. “Everyone in this company, everyone in the Red Moons that is, comes with a story. Your parents for instance. You don’t like the way the Alignment is treating them, do you?”

“My parents were both taken from their clinic and forced to work for the Alignment military as combat surgeons. It’s almost as if they’ve been locked up. I just want them back.”

“Hugo’s parents were Imperial nobility. He lived on a corporate world during the reign of the Emperor. His parents tried everything to keep him under control, including locking him up. I was treated like an animal once. I know what it’s like to be caged. When you go through life like that, sometimes you need someone to keep you in check. Hugo minds over me like I mind him.”

Kempo pulled himself to his feet and handed the salve back to her.

“Remember kid, the first rule of soldiering is to not let appearances fool you. Tigereye didn’t choose us for this team just because of our singing voices. Tigereye’s got more combat experience in his little right toe claw than most Imperial generals. Hugo can make an AT-ST dance a jig and explode with just a spanner and a thermal detonator. My job is to make sure we survive to brag about this little tale. And in case we do fall apart, Lady Brix, your job is to put the little pieces back together so I can collect my finish fee.”

Brixie felt completely embarrassed. What she had mistaken for open hostility among the three veterans was actually their way of dealing with yet another impossible situation.

Hugo Cutter’s head suddenly appeared over the log.

“Excuse me. I don’t want to interrupt your talking about me, but I think I found something.”

From a distance, the sensor mast appeared like a metal chrome ball mounted on a pole slightly taller than the surrounding vegetation. Others just like it rose approximately 20 meters to either side. They positioned themselves almost 30 meters away from the distinct-looking sensor fence.

“Looks like we found their perimeter,” Kempo muttered quietly to Tigereye, not anxious to trip any possible acoustical pickups. Behind them, Cutter and Brixie waited anxiously.

“Or we tripped over a buried, outer perimeter line already.” Tigereye checked his own detection instruments. Despite his concern, the possibility of an outer barrier was unlikely here. The everpresent moisture and local lifeforms would make short work of almost anything made of metal or complex circuitry buried in the humus. He glanced back. “All right Hugo, you’re on.”

Cutter took off his service jacket and dumped the contents of his bag of tricks on to it. Shaped charges, broken datapads, anti-vehicle grenades, droid parts and bits of c-board and chips spilled everywhere. Kempo eyed the strange assortment with some disdain.

“You’re carrying enough junk to supply Industrial Automaton.”

“Spare me,” Cutter snapped back as he set to work. Brixie watched the entire process with interest as Kempo and Tigereye took up sentry positions close by. Not even realizing she had been recruited to assist him, Cutter was asking her for tools from the tech kit and bits from the scrap pile. In minutes, a truly strange conglomeration of sensor boards, probe droid chips, scanners and communication jammers was taking shape.

“Is this going to work?” she asked.

Cutter took a moment to sit back and admire his Creation with a small sense of satisfaction. “They banned me from the Imperial Engineering Academy. They laughed at me. Well, does this look like the work of a madman to you?”

Brixie stared hard at the device. Cutter looked up at her, perhaps sensing the thoughts crossing her mind. A crooked little smile formed across his lips.

“Don’t bother answering that.”

A crashing sound from the nearby bushes startled all of them into silence. Kempo growled over to them, “Keep down. Someone just set off one of my door bells.”



Tigereye pulled out a set of macrobinoculars. Keeping his view on the trail they had just come from, he waited for several long moments. He saw a brief movement and focused. Through the viewfinder, he saw a scaly head sniffing the ground. Moving the binocs slowly, he finally caught the rider wearing a camosuit to blend against the jungle backdrop. The rider was clenching a long force pike in his free hand as he examined Kempo's "door bell," a tree limb tied across the trail with thin cord.

"What is it?" Kempo whispered.

"Looks like a tracker. Riding some kind of two-legged reptoid."

Kempo used the targeting sight on his stormtrooper rifle to watch the newcomer.

"I see him now. Another might be close by," he whispered.

"Another won't make any difference. All it takes is one report to bring the whole slaver camp down on our heads."

"Those odds are good enough for me." Kempo un-snapped the scabbard on his back and handed Brixie a very sharp vibrocutlass, its blade and edges blackened for military duty. She dubiously took the weapon in her hands.

"What's this for?"

"You get to watch my back for a change. I've had enough of this mud crawl." Kempo started running toward the trees. "The rest of you take down the fence. I'll handle the bad guys!"

"Kempo! I didn't ..." Tigereye snarled at him just as the pathfinder took off. Brixie and Cutter looked to him for guidance. "Don't just sit there! Hugo, disarm the fence. Brixie, you cover him!" No sooner had he said that when he too had disappeared through the thick growth.

Kempo dropped to one knee as he sprang through the trees, startling the tracker and his mount. He fired the blaster rifle at short range, but missed the rider.

The rider spurred the trained reptoid and charged. The creature snapped at the open air just by his head, then tried to cleave him open with serrated feet claws. Kempo fired back, his stolen set of Imperial scout armor taking the brunt of the beast's charge as it sent him sprawling. The impact knocked the blaster rifle out of his hands.

Poised above him, the tracker raised his force pike to strike. A howling, fur-covered missile burst from the trees, turning the tracker's attention away. Sully Tigereye crashed against both tracker and beast, his vibro-ax swinging and connecting against the creature's thick hide. The reptoid screamed from the terrible injury and bolted away, carrying its rider reluctantly along with it. With the tracker's back turned to them now, Kempo picked up his fallen weapon and fired. A screaming burst of energy struck the tracker square in the back, killing him before he struck the ground. The injured reptoid, now riderless, kept on crashing loudly away through the foliage.

Tigereye brandished his vibro-ax at Kempo.

"I should have let that thing take a bite out of you, if only to teach you a lesson."

"I was doing just fine before you showed up."

"Let me guess—you had him exactly where you wanted him," the Trunsk snorted as he caught his breath. "Check the body. If we're lucky, he didn't have a chance to report in."

"We're never that lucky," Kempo retorted as he headed over to the body of the dead tracker.

Hugo got to his feet, holding up the contraption. Brixie looked on, eyeing him and his spontaneous invention dubiously. He began to move slowly toward the sensor mast, fumbling for the power switches that would activate the united parts. He suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Brixie half-whispered to him, trying to watch him and their surroundings at the same time.

“Something about this type of sensor mast.”

He took another step. A whine came from the datapad’s power coupling. The device was not used to handling the power requirements of the other components. The two and a half meter tall mast loomed over his head as he slowly approached. An expression of recognition came over Cutter. He stopped in his tracks, making quick adjustments to the components in his hands.

“Now I remember!”

“Remember what?” Brixie sputtered.

An intense beeping came from Hugo’s contraption. Before Brixie’s eyes, an alternating pattern of light began to phase from the sensor mast. She gasped as the solid-looking ground before their feet suddenly evaporated, exposing a cargo speeder-sized ditch trap. Explosives and mines lay at the bottom of the excavated pit. Hugo smirked.

“A holographic trap. Very sneaky. Very expensive. These slavers have better security than I thought. Did you see how I set the multiphase emitter to turn off the hologram?”

Brixie had been watching Hugo so intently that she almost did not hear the sound of dead leaves and underbrush being crushed behind her. She spun around, Kempo’s vibrocutlass in her hands. A second tracker and his reptoid leered at her like predators about to pounce. A threatening rumble echoed in the sharp-toothed beast’s throat as the tracker leveled the point of his force pike at Brixie’s throat.

“Ah, Hugo?” she gulped.

The sound of a female scream cut through the jungle air like the edge of Sully Tigereye’s polished vibro-ax. The Trunk plunged through the jungle, back toward the sensor perimeter.

Tigereye stumbled into a clearing in time to see Lex Kempo drop from the trees and fall on the tracker. The reptoid bucked underneath them as the pathfinder slapped a now familiar-

looking organism on the tracker's head. The tracker, his eyes completely covered by the filmy creature, knocked Kempo off as he swung the force pike wildly.

The whole scene looked completely ridiculous until the blinded tracker spurred the reptoid forward. A shot from Tigereye's own heavy blaster brought the tracker down, but the creature still charged into and over a shrieking Brixie.

"Brixie!" Tigereye bellowed, leaping forward.

The beast suddenly became quiet and rolled away from the startled girl in a heap—Kempo's vibrocutlass buried up to its hilt in its scaly chest. She looked more terrified than hurt as Tigereye ran up to her.

"Are you okay?"

She gulped once and fought to bring her fear under control.

"Yes ... yes I'm fine."

Even Cutter was stunned as he looked up at the tree branch where Kempo had jumped from.

"And I thought I was crazy," he muttered.

Kempo had gotten to his feet. Brixie watched him for some time, trying to think of some way to thank him without sounding petty. Shrugging the incident away, the pathfinder turned his back to her and retrieved his vibrocutlass. He then moved to the body of the fallen tracker, switching off his comlink. Exhaling hard, Brixie collected her medkit and gear, not desiring to look on the scene anymore.

In the meantime, Cutter and Tigereye had turned their attention to the disarmed sensor mast and the exposed pit trap.

"Can we go around it?" Tigereye had exchanged his vibro-ax for the map locator. Cutter triumphantly held up his device.

"No problem. Those slavers are probably scratching their heads, wondering how we did it."

"If the slavers stick around long enough to wonder." Tigereye interjected. "We have only one shot at this. Karazak slavers aren't stupid. Once they figure out we bypassed their perimeter, they

will probably leave their paid guns behind to pick us off while they jump planet with their valuables—including the children.”

“Sully,” Brixie slung a medical pack over her shoulder. “Before we go any further with this, I have to know who these children are. The least you can do is tell us why their lives are more important than ours.”

“The kid’s right,” Kempo added as he sheathed the vibrocutlass in its carrier. “I’m deliberately jumping out of perfectly good trees for these pups. You owe us that much.”

Tigereye sighed. “They’re the children of the ambassador to Cantras Gola.”

“Cantras Gola is a corporate world.” Brixie found herself getting angry. “An Alignment world. What’s so important about that?”

“Everything,” Tigereye silenced her. “Kempo is right, Brixie. We’re soldiers. We don’t ask questions. We supply answers. With an entire corporate world about to sway over to the New Republic, and the New Republic unable to openly confront the Pentastar Alignment, you need someone else to fight the battle. We are that someone else.”

“But I thought the reason why the Red Moons broke away from the New Republic was because the New Republic wasn’t doing enough. Now we’re fighting their battles for them!”

“Helping the New Republic win Cantras Gola helps everyone. Like it or not, returning these kids alive to the Cantras Gola ambassador is crucial. We need to take that slaver ship before it gets away. It’s the only way to save those kids and for us to get off this planet. Now are there more questions from the ranks?”

The four of them looked at each other, the faint odor of ozone from blaster fire still in the air around them.

“I suppose it’s too late to request a transfer?” Kempo remarked.

The longer he waited, the more Greezim Trentacal nervously paced about the deluxe stateroom aboard *Atron's Mistress*. The trackers sent out to investigate the crashed freighter's missing escape pod had not reported in for several hours. There was more to the mysterious, downed vessel than even Vex had anticipated.

"They must be soldiers. Or worse. Mercenaries." He shuddered at the thought. The incentive of credits and personal fortune that drove beings to enslave other beings also drove them to fight for foolish causes.

"Well?" He looked to Vex, still poised like a dark statue beside the stateroom's viewports. He dropped the comlink from his ear.

"The tracker team is still not responding. In addition, one of the perimeter sensors seems to have malfunctioned, although I do not know why yet."

"They're here!" Trentacal put a hand over his mouth, completely alarmed now. "Lords of Atron! They're here already! Give the order to debark. Immediately!"

"As I pointed out earlier," the Defel spoke quietly but firmly, "we have not loaded the latest shipment of slaves." He gestured at the large prefabricated building that served as a temporary clearing-house for the newest arrivals. "They have to be tagged and medically scanned. Many slaves from this shipment are to be sold to the Hutts. You know how displeased the Hutts become when they are sent inferior wares."

"You can medically scan them after they have been loaded. Do as I command!"

Vex's expression did not change. He bowed slightly.

"I will give the order personally, master. We shall depart immediately."

Trentacal rushed out of the stateroom to his own sleeping quarters. The Defel wraith looked upon the ambassador's children, still chained to the cabin wall. Expressions laden with fear and loathing gazed back up at him. The girl, several years

older than her brother, tried to protectively shield him from Vex's penetrating, awful stare.

Suddenly, the wraith was gone. The girl blinked, uncertain whether or not to believe her eyes. She had not imagined the disappearance. Abruptly, the cabin door bolts clanged solidly shut, locking them in darkness again. Her brother whimpered. She held him a little tighter, silently wondering what would become of them.

Something touched her shoulder. The girl gasped loudly, if only long enough for a hand to clamp down over her mouth. She recognized the pained expression of Trentacal's favorite slave girl. How long had she been hiding here, waiting for Vex to leave? The slave pressed a key into her hand and made a gesture with her finger to her lips.

Before she could say a word of thanks, the door to Trentacal's private chamber was suddenly shoved aside, the slave master's bulky outline filling the doorway. His face was masked in shadow.

"What's going on in here?"

Lying prone in the foliage ahead of the assault team, Lex Kempo aimed the macrobinoculars at the clearing in the jungle growth before him.

"What do you see?" Brixie whispered beside him.

The slaver camp consisted of several watchtowers, a few prefabricated buildings and a currently vacant landing pad for a snubfighter-sized craft. In the middle of the camp, the jungle's heavy humus had been pressure-formed flat to provide room for the large cargo transport situated there. Beings of all origins were being rushed into the ship, which was not a good sign.

Kempo chewed slowly on a bit of protein survival wafer as he continued to sight the camp through the binocs. "Looks like we're outgunned maybe seven to one. There are four watchtowers armed with blaster cannons: two close to us, two

past the freighter. The camp is crawling with thugs. See that bunker right beside the ship? Looks like their command center. All sensors, communications and defensive controls are probably housed in there.”

“Are those hatches on the side?”

Kempo frowned as he zoomed the binoculars. “You’ve got laser eyes, kid. Those are definitely gun ports. It doesn’t matter, that bunker might as well be half a light year away. We’ll get cut down before we even reach the freighter.”

“Not if I can keep them occupied,” Cutter’s voice murmured behind them.

Kempo and Brixie looked around in unison at Cutter and his bag of magic tricks. In his hands he had one of the oddly concave Mesonics focalized explosives, the kind used to demolish structures. Squatting beside Hugo, Sully Tigereye made a hand gesture, fingers spread open wide which he turned into a fist Kempo snorted derisively, but still nodded in agreement. Confused, Brixie poked at Kempo.

“I’m not familiar with that hand signal,” she whispered to him. “What does it mean?”

The pathfinder smiled grimly as he switched the safety off on the grenade launcher mounted to his storm-trooper blaster rifle.

“It means hang on to your pretty head. We’re about to make some noise.”

The slave girl lunged at Trentacal, a slender metal object in her hands. Despite his size, the slave master could move quickly if he wanted to. In seconds, he had the girl’s arms pinned. She strained silently against his grip, trying to bite his hands. Trentacal held her long enough for him to press the emergency call. The wraith and several armed guards appeared in moments, just as Trentacal pushed the slave girl roughly to the cabin floor.

“Fools! All of you! You’re supposed to protect me!” He held up the knife he had taken and pointed it at the slave girl. “I want



you to vaporize this insolent thing and get us out of here! And pray that my next wish is not all of your heads on a serving platter!" The guards drew their energy weapons, aiming them at the slave. The ambassador's daughter cried aloud, trying to shield her brother from the cruel scene.

A muffled explosion rattled the huge transport. Trentacal's eyes bulged in mute surprise as he watched two of the guard towers tip over and collapse in perfect unison.

Kempo and Brixie had made it only as far as the makeshift landing pad for the camp's snubfighter when the snouts of several huge blaster cannons appeared from slits in the command bunker. The heavy weapons were laying down a withering curtain of fire, pinning them there.

"Hold still!" Brixie was still trying to apply a medical wrap to Kempo's singed right leg. The pathfinder had unexpectedly been the first target of the heavy blaster attack.

"Look at the size of those guns!" Kempo clucked his tongue in a tisking manner. "They probably ripped them out from some capital ship."

"Who cares! Can you see Hugo and Sully?"

Kempo poked his head slightly around the corner and shot a slaver guard in the torso, dropping him instantly. He spotted Cutter's familiar tousled mane of hair as he hid from the energy fire coming from the command bunker. The prefabricated structures he hid behind would not last for long.

"Hugo's trapped over by those buildings." He tapped his comlink switch twice, but there was no reply. He shook his head. "I can't raise Sully, but I think he made it to the freighter."

When Kempo looked around the corner again, the bunker's weapons were aiming once again for Cutter. Energy beams rained down all over the demolitions expert, burning away huge chunks of the prefabricated structures. Kempo shouted over the din back to Brixie.

“Hugo’s gonna be a little smoking pile of nothing unless we do something to shut those guns up!”

Surprised by his words, she looked over at the impregnable command bunker. “But shouldn’t we be going for the freighter? That’s our way out of here!”

“Leaving teammates behind is *not* in my employment description.”

Kempo took a step back and jostled something. The niche where they were hiding served as a storage shed for the landing pad. He disappeared for a moment inside and returned with a grav-cart and a half dozen large cylinders with prominent warning labels plastered over them.

“I think it’s time we extended a warm Red Moon greeting to our slaver friends.”

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Two guards armed with stun prods stood by a secondary boarding ramp of the cargo transport, shoving as many of the enslaved beings as they could into the ship. Many of the slaves, panicked by the explosions and screaming beams of energy fire, had taken this opportunity to run. The guards were in no place to argue. One by one, the other loading ramps were closing as the ship began its final preparations for takeoff. A message crackled over the guards’ secure comlinks. Relieved to be as far away from the shooting as possible, they began to climb the ramp. As one of the guards turned to follow the slaves in, he noticed a slave without a restraint collar. He growled to his partner as he seized the Trunsk by the arm.

“Hey! They forgot to put a pain collar on this one.”

Sully Tigereye turned around. Sharpened fighting claws seized the startled guard by his chin. In his other hand, he aimed a heavy blaster pistol at the second guard and shot the stun prod right out of his hands. The guard spun and ran.

“There will be no more pain collars. Not as long as I live.” He clenched the first guard by the jowls of his neck and swung his face close. “Now that I have your undivided attention—where’s your boss?”

Working quickly, Kempo and Brixie stacked the cart with the fuel cylinders they had found as well as the explosives and grenades they were carrying. The cannon fire around them was getting closer and closer.

“Come to think of it, there’s one small problem with this plan,” Kempo muttered half-aloud.

“We don’t have time for problems!” Brixie replied, wincing slightly as a piece of the nearby landing pad was blasted apart by a bunker weapon.

“One of us is going to have to pilot this thing up to their doorstep.”

They both looked at each other, eyes frozen. A tight little grin began to form across Kempo’s face. He took Brixie’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“Don’t worry kid, I just volunteered.” The pathfinder climbed aboard and took up a position by the cart’s steering controls, trying to hunker down low. He handed her the stormtrooper rifle.

“Keep them occupied long enough for me to get up close.” He activated the cart’s repulsorlift controls. The cart surged slowly forward as he smirked back at her.

“Just don’t let people forget about me, right?”

She shook her head. There was something about his expression that she had never seen before. There was so much she wanted to learn about him and no time left.

As the grav-cart emerged, Brixie took up a position to the side of the landing pad. She fired the rifle’s grenade launcher, spitting concussion explosives at the hardened outer shell of the command bunker—for what little good it would do.

The grav-cart zigzagged across the clearing. For what felt like an eternity, the bunker's blaster weapons clumsily tried to follow him, just barely missing. Just as the grav-cart reached the bunker, Brixie could see the pathfinder time his leap—only to stumble on the cart's side railing. His foot caught, he was dragged relentlessly along until ...

The next second, she was looking up at the failing light of the evening sky. The shock wave had knocked Brixie flat on her back. She staggered to her feet. Where there had been a command bunker, there was now only the jagged remains of a permacrete foundation. Even the sides of the cargo transport had been scorched by the blast. Slavers were running wildly in all directions. She moved to the edge of the heart of the fire, shielding her face as she looked for a familiar form to stagger out.

Kempo had to come out. That's the way the holos always ended. The hero always walked out

Nobody did.

Hugo grabbed her by the arm and began pulling her over to the ship.

"No!" she screamed at him. "We won't leave a teammate behind! We can't!"

He had to drag her away from the inferno.

The explosion was so huge it shook the cargo transport violently on its landing legs.

The transport bridge's accessway popped open. Tigereye shoved the guard into a few of the crewers standing there. Several reached for weapons, but they were not fast enough. Energy beams ricocheted across the bridge. When it was over, Tigereye waved the blaster pistol at the survivors.

"Everybody in the escape pod! Now!"

They filed into the bridge's lifeboat pod. Tigereye sealed the hatchway behind them, locking them inside. After securing the bridge, he then tapped his comlink.

There was no need. Brixie and Hugo Cutter appeared at the bridge's accessway. The demolitions expert's shoulders were sagging. Brixie was crestfallen, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Tigereye understood immediately. Kempo. The explosion.

His hands balled into fists, Tigereye wanted to scream. He wanted to tear the bridge apart. He grabbed the guard he had taken prisoner and slammed him against one of the control consoles so hard the impact dented the panels. He shoved the datapad before the guard's eyes, pictures of the ambassador's children flashing on the tiny screen.

"They're not among the slaves held down below. So *where* are they?"

The guard gestured at another doorway on the bridge.

"They're in the master's quarters! In there!"

Tigereye tossed the heavy blaster pistol to Cutter as he unsheathed his vibro-ax.

"Set weapons to stun. We need those children alive."

"I'm coming too," Brixie stepped forward, shaking, still clenching Lex Kempo's stormtrooper rifle with whitened knuckles. Tigereye gestured at the guard.

"No. You have to watch him."

Brixie pivoted and shot the guard using the blaster rifle's stun setting at point-blank range. The guard slumped over into unconsciousness.

"He's going nowhere," she replied tersely as she inserted two stun grenades into the rifle launcher.

Tigereye and Cutter regarded each other, surprised.

Muffled blaster fire erupted from somewhere behind the door, followed by a painful scream. Tigereye gestured to Cutter at the door controls.

"Open it. Now!"

The well-appointed domain of the slave master was almost completely dark. The slave master himself was dead, slumped over in his lounge. Brixie immediately took a step toward the young girl and her brother still chained to the wall, but Tigereye held her back. From the way they were cowering in silence, he could tell something was not right.

“Someone else is in here,” Tigereye whispered.

“That is correct,” a voice from the dark declared.

Crouching low, the mercenaries separated as they made their way into the cabin. As she moved past the lounge, Brixie’s foot grazed something soft. She inhaled sharply as she saw the torn throat of a dead slave girl lying on the floor, a hold-out blaster still clutched in her tiny hands. The slave master’s guards lay dead close by.

“She saw an opportunity to escape,” the voice explained matter-of-factly. “I had to convince her otherwise. Take a good look, mercenaries. Your fate will be the same as hers.”

A shape lunged at Cutter, sending him sprawling across the floor. In just moments, the shape appeared again, claws burying deep inside Brixie’s protective vest. The thing shoved her into the wall, knocking her senseless. The stormtrooper rifle clattered to the floor.

Holding her injured head and side, she heard more fighting. Trying to focus, she saw their attacker stand against the dim light of the cabin’s viewports for only a moment. She immediately recognized the shaggy, black-furred creature from her medical training at the university. No wonder the lights were out!

“It’s a Defel! A wraith!”

Tigereye found the cabin’s lighting controls and flipped them to their maximum setting. Glowspheres filled the room with brightness. The terrifying creature screamed in agony, trying to shield its eyes from the powerful lights.

Surrounded and blinded, the Defel spun around wildly. Brixie had picked up the stormtrooper blaster rifle. Hugo Cutter was back up on his feet, blaster pistol in hand, his face badly bruised.

Sully Tigereye's gaze narrowed to a chilled yellow as he took a step forward, vibro-ax in hand.

"The only fate you should be worrying about ... is your own."

The cargo ship, almost fully laden with freed slaves, climbed slowly into the sky above Gabredor III. Below on the night-eclipsed surface of the planet, the destroyed slaver camp burned with a vengeance. Tigereye had made it a point that they should leave plenty of Red Moon marks for all to find there. Knowing they had been targeted, the Karazak Slavers Guild would have to look long and hard for another place to conduct its business. And with the children of the Gola ambassador safely aboard the ship, the Pentastar Alignment had lost as well.

In Brixie's heart, it was a hollow victory. They had tried to search the wreckage of the command bunker, but the fire was simply too hot. She sat in a chair on the transport's bridge, keeping to herself as Tigereye and Cutter familiarized themselves with the ship's astrogation controls. She finally thought about taking the helmet off her head. With a tired sigh, she undid the straps and let the helmet fall to the deck beside her feet.

Tigereye looked over at the sound. During her training, it had been difficult for her to judge the Trunsk—to separate reputation from reality. The same clawed hands which had so eagerly torn the Defel to pieces were the same hands which gladly unlocked the pain collars of dozens of slaves.

She finally realized why he had chosen her for this mission. There were some things that cannot come with training or preparation, they must be experienced and felt. Brixie had experienced the camaraderie and the fear, seen the violence and death that was all part of the life of the blaster-for-hire. For a brief moment, Tigereye's expression softened. He and Hugo would mourn the loss of their lifetime friend in their own ways.

Her gaze fell upon the bridge's visual screens. Gabredor III was falling slowly away. She found herself wishing Lex was here,

wondering what his reaction would have been to her realization. He probably would have just winked at her.

Then she saw the remains of the slaver camp on the screens. A chill ran down her spine—there was something familiar about the shape of fires down there. Kempo's voice echoed in her mind. In his own words, the pathfinder had indeed gone out in a blaze of glory.

From hundreds of kilometers above, the explosion that had flattened the command bunker appeared like a fiercely glowing crescent ...

A red moon.



# Slaying Dragons by Angela Phillips

*Improper Passcode—Access Denied ...*

*Improper Passcode—Access Denied ...*

*Improper Passcode—Access Denied ...*

“A plume of smoke from the end of the canyon heralded the approach of the dragon. Veni drew closer to his elder sister as Vici activated her lightsaber.”

*Improper Passcode—Access Denied ...*

*Improper Passcode—Access Denied ...*

“Veni trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. But Vici was not afraid. Though only 16 years old, she held the mighty power of the Force tightly in her hands. The dragon drew closer.”

*Vweep! Access Granted ...*

Shannon Voorson set her story platform aside and turned back to the monitor. “Finally,” she muttered. This code had taken longer to slice than usual. Still, she reflected, any code one computer can generate, another can imitate. First Law of Slicing. Now, she thought, let’s see if we’ve found anything interesting...

“Oh, yuck,” she sighed when she saw the contents of the file she’d entered: a register of six new Star Destroyers nearing completion at the nearby Kuat Drive Yards. What stupid names they have, she thought—the *Impervious*, the *Penetrator*, the *Inflexible*, the *Indomitable*, the *Inexorable*, and the *Exterminator*. If I were naming Star Destroyers, she thought, I’d give them names like the *Iron Hand*, the *Raptor*, or the *Titania*. Still, what do you expect from people with so little imagination they let computers come up with their access codes?

Shannon heard voices through the thin pre-fab walls of her room; someone had entered the apartment, and her parents were greeting the visitor. Deciding to investigate, she saved the Star Destroyer files under the password “dumbnames” and shut down her computer’s code program.

The Voorson family had been techs at Kuat Freight Port for generations. Most of them had spent their entire lives aboard the station—they were born in the company Wellness Center, educated in the company school, apprenticed to and then hired by Kuat Port Support Services. They married co-workers, raised their families in company housing, and rarely left the station, even to go so far as the planet Kuat itself. There was no reason to leave—the company stores on the station provided everything they needed, the pay and benefits for KFP workers were among the best in the system, and they had the pride and satisfaction of knowing that, as members of the Kuat Engineering conglomerate, they were helping build the finest starships in the galaxy. Still, every so often a Voorson would look beyond the comfortable walls of a station apartment to see what the rest of the thousand-thousand worlds had to offer. Shannon’s cousin, Deen, was one of these wandering Voorsons.

“Deen!” she squealed excitedly at the sight of the young man embracing her father. “Oh, Deen, it’s you! You’re finally here! Where have you been? What have you been doing?” Shannon leapt at the guest.

Her cousin turned to catch her. “Hey, Little Bit, I’ve missed you! Oof!” He grunted, as he tried to lift her off the floor. “You’ve grown, Little Bit—let me look at you! You’re so tall now, and your hair is so long—when I left, you were a baby, with braids only to your ears, and Aunt Nell had you sleep with a scarf on to keep them from standing straight up in the morning!”

Nell Voorson nodded, and smiled wryly. “Now I have to keep her from chewing the ends.”

“Oh, Deen,” said Shannon, “I’ve missed you so—come and see my room! It’s all different now, and I have my own computer and everything!” She tugged on his hand.

Deen smiled indulgently at the child. “I’ve missed you, too, Little Bit, but don’t you think your parents want to talk to me too?”

“Oh, go with her, Deen,” said Nell. “You can talk while Johan and I get supper on.”

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“I can’t believe you’re really here,” said Shannon, hopping up and down in the center of her room. “It’s been four whole years! What have you been doing?”

“Slaying dragons.”

Shannon laughed. “No, Deen, really!”

“Really! Well, sort of. Helping to slay artificial dragons—I’ve been working as a tech.” He took a seat next to Shannon’s computer.

“Where?”

“Oh, different places,” he said. His dark eyes wandered over the room. “Are you still reading those old stories grandmother

gave you?” he asked as he spotted the story platform on her computer.

“Yep,” said Shannon, “even though Mother says I should outgrow them, like dolls.”

“I don’t see many dolls here,” said Deen.

“Yep. I like computers now. I’m a slicer. I can slice into anything.”

“Anything?” Deen asked, chuckling.

“Anything. So who do you work for? What kind of work do you do? Do you get paid a lot? Do you fix droids, or ships, or what?”

“Hey,” said Deen, “one question at a time! I work for some friends I made, right after I left here. They’re good friends. I don’t get paid a lot, but I like what I’m doing. Mostly I work on ships ...”

“What kind?”

“Small starcraft, mostly, but some larger ones, and anything else that my friends need fixed. I have to be flexible.”

“What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to fix?”

Deen paused. “Well,” he said, glancing at the closed bedroom door, “a few months ago, I had to adapt some airspeeders to operate at 20 degrees below freezing ...”

“And did they work?”

“Well enough ... That’s *Vici of Alderaan*, isn’t it?” he asked, pointing to the story platform on the computer.

“Yup, it’s still my favorite. Vici is so brave.”

“One who has the Force need have no fear,” Deen murmured.

“That’s what Vici’s grandfather tells her. Say,” Shannon asked, “did you get a chance to visit Alderaan? Before ...”

Deen shook his head. “No. I never did. I wish I could have. But I never had the chance.”

“It’s not fair,” said Shannon, settling on the floor.

“That I never got to Alderaan?” asked her cousin.

“That they blew it up. Stupid Empire. Why’d they do it? Grandmother always said Alderaan was a planet of peace and beauty. There weren’t any weapons there. Why’d they do it?”

“Because of that,” said Deen, pointing.

“Because of my story platform?”

“Because of that story,” said Deen. “That story, and others like it. The stories of Alderaan were more dangerous to the Emperor than any weapon.”

“How can a story be more dangerous than a weapon?” asked Shannon.

“Because of the ideas in it. On Alderaan, people still believed in the Force. On Alderaan, people remembered the Jedi Knights and the Old Republic. The people of Alderaan remembered the way things were in the galaxy before the coming of the Empire, before the days of hate and fear. And their stories, libraries and universities held all of the ideas that can destroy the Emperor—that love is stronger than hate, that people are stronger than weapons, that combined together the people in this galaxy have a strength the Emperor can never oppose.” Deen’s eyes were shining.

“So the Emperor,” said Shannon, “destroyed Alderaan to destroy all these ideas?”

“He tried,” said Deen, “but he didn’t succeed. He can never succeed. The only way for him to control all the ideas in the galaxy would be for him to kill or enslave everyone in the galaxy, and that’s impossible. He can’t win. The more crimes he commits, the more people will stand up to fight him ...”

“Deen,” asked Shannon, “are you a Rebel?”

Deen put a hand to his mouth.

“It’s all right,” Shannon added, “I won’t tell anybody. Not even Mom and Dad. Here,” she said, switching to the computer, “look what I found today. Just before you got here. I’ll give you a copy if you want ...”

“How did you access this?” Deen asked, staring at the list of Star Destroyers. “Do you have any idea ...”

“It’s easy to slice into Imperial files; they have computer-rigged pass-names. I make up my own codes myself. Usually animal names, like ‘nerf,’ or ‘bhillen,’ or even ‘dog.’ ”

“I can’t believe this,” Deen said, still reading the data-screen. “Do you know what this is worth—do you know what will happen to you if someone catches you at this?”

“No one’s ever gotten past my codes,” said Shannon proudly.

“Maybe no one’s ever considered investigating the files of a nine-year-old girl,” said Deen. “You’ve got to stop this—you’ll get yourself killed!”

Shannon bit her lip. “Does that mean you don’t want copies of the files?”

Mistress Voorson called them to dinner, cutting off Deen’s answer.

Gathered around a pot of stewed bhillen, the family discussed the last four years: Shannon’s schooling, Nell’s promotion to senior docking supervisor of Kuat Freight Port, Johan and Deen’s work as techs. Johan complained about impatient starship captains expecting miracles. Deen told horror stories of combatting heat, cold, humidity, dust, ice, offensive flora, fauna, microbes, and every other threat to machinery on backwater worlds he neglected to name.

“You actually found moss growing in the ships’ coolant coils?” asked Johan.

“Yep,” said Deen. “Two hours before launch.”

“Did you get ’em cleaned up in time?”

Deen grinned. “Skin of our teeth.”

“The Force was with you,” his uncle said.

Nell frowned slightly. “It’s good to have you home, Deen, after so long. I was beginning to think you’d left us for good. And now,” she said, “here you are. Are you in trouble, Deen? Do you need anything?”

“Nell,” her husband protested, “can’t a boy fly in without an ulterior motive?”

Deen stared at his plate. “Actually,” he said, poking his custard with a spoon, “I was wondering ...”

“Ah, here it comes,” said Nell.

“My friends,” Deen continued, “the ones I work with ... They’ve had some problems lately, lost a lot of equipment ...”

“Lost?” asked Nell.

“Uh, yeah, damaged. Beyond repair.”

“How?” asked Johan.

“Well ... there were a lot of asteroids, and—it’s a long story, but the point is, we need a Colony Class 23669 power generator, and ...”

“Why don’t you contact the factory, then?” asked Nell. “If you put your order in now, you could have the generator in six months or less, barring rush orders from Imperial Procurement.”

“We need it sooner than that, and we’ve heard a generator’s being shipped out of here to an Imperial outpost within two weeks.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with you,” said Johan.

“Well, see, Aunt Nell, you control the docking stations, and we figured if we could arrange docking clearance, you could slip in our barge driver in place of the Imperials’ ...”

“I cannot believe,” Nell said, “that you are sitting at my dining table talking about hijacking 25 million credits worth of power generator as if you were asking to borrow a speeder.”

“But Aunt Nell ...”

“You’re talking about stealing that generator, aren’t you?”

“But ... we could pay you ...”

Nell’s mouth fell open. Johan found his voice. “Deen, do you hear what you’re saying? This isn’t just another prank, like the time you sliced into the school comm-system with phony evacuation drills ...”

“This is treason,” Nell finished. “Deen, I don’t want to hear another word about these so-called friends of yours. Now,

because you're my nephew, I'm not going to turn you in and we're all going to pretend this conversation never happened. Is that perfectly clear?"

The meal ended in silence.

Shannon couldn't sleep that night. Hearing voices from her parents' room, she crept to their door to listen.

"The Alliance is desperate for equipment, Nell!"

"Do you think I care? Johan, that Alliance will never feed my family or give Shannon an education that'll get her off this station!"

"But the Empire ..."

"... Owns this system, and everything in it. Including us. And they have ways of disposing of traitors. Accidents. Johan, do you honestly believe it was a coincidence your brother died in that reactor malfunction less than a week after he'd repaired those Rebels' ship? Nothing is worth the safety of my family, Johan, nothing. Not the Alliance, not Alderaan ..."

"Not even Deen?"

Shannon didn't stay to hear her mother's answer.

Deen left the next morning after a tense, silent breakfast.

"If you change your minds," he began.

"We won't," his aunt said. "Now drop the subject."

"But if you do," Deen persisted, "I'll be in-system for a few days. Here's a signaller you can use to contact me," he said, dropping the hand-held electronic device on a table near the door. "May the Force be with you."

"Destroy that signaller," said Nell after the door had closed.

"I'll do it, Mom," said Shannon, snatching up the device and darting to the reclamator. The appliance disposed of the morning's trash with a satisfying "crunch"—but the signaller remained hidden in Shannon's pocket.



The elder Voorsons behaved as if Deen had never come; if Shannon mentioned his “friends” or his request for aid, she was sent to her room without discussion.

“I can’t understand it!” she said to herself on one such occasion. It’s not as if the station doesn’t mix stuff up all the time, she thought. Mother’s always complaining about this-or-that going missing. Bugs in the station net—that’s what she always says. If she gave Deen that generator, everyone would just think it was another computer mistake ...

Rolling out of her bed, Shannon flipped on her computer. A few minutes and slices later, she had the list of upcoming exports scrolling across her screen. There it is, she thought, a CC-23669 generator, to be picked up at loading dock 42, at 1430 hours, five days from now. All right, she thought, if I change the pickup date, Mother will surely notice and stop us. Can’t change the dock number either, that would make a huge fuss. But if I changed the time ... How long does it take to link a driver to a barge? Daddy says he can do it in less than an hour—would two hours be enough?

She changed the pickup time to 1230 and hoped her mother wouldn’t notice. Then she pulled Deen’s signaller from under her pillow.

. . .

“Who are you?” asked the security guard.

Shannon gulped and tried to look cute and harmless.

“Shannon Voorson, ma’am,” she said.

“Oh, Shannon,” the woman said, recognizing the child, “why aren’t you at school yet? What’re you doing here?”

Shannon knew that “I’m running away to join the Rebellion,” would not be a popular answer to that question. Fortunately, she had come prepared with a lie.

“My daddy forgot his lunch, so’s I’m bringing it to him before I go. A bhillen sandwich—see?” She set her portable computer

down and opened the thermabag to thrust it into the guard's face so that she was sure to catch the aroma of Bestinnian tang-root.

"Oh, ah, yeah, sure," said the guard, pulling back and blinking. "Go find your daddy. I'm sure he'll love it."

"Thanks," said Shannon. She bolted off, thinking that raw tang-root was pretty stinky, but there was no way that guard was going to dig past it and find Deen's signaller.

She continued down the corridor toward her father's work area for a few more steps, ducked into an alcove, peeked out to see that the guard was gone, and then doubled back toward dock 42.

The techs hadn't arrived at the dock yet that morning, so Shannon had no trouble slicing her way into the cargo container with a few connecting cables from her portable computer. After a surprisingly long crawl over, under, and around the generator to the front of the container, she settled down with her book-chips to wait for Deen.

"You sure this'll work, Deen?" said Boo Rawl, captain of the Rebel barge driver *Long Run*.

"For the thousandth time Boo, yes! My aunt is the docking supervisor at this port. She wouldn't have signalled for us to come if she didn't have everything at this end arranged. I didn't live through the evacuation of Echo Base just to get blown out of the sky by my own family."

"I'm not nearly as worried about your family as I am about what you've done to my sublight engines," said Boo.

"I didn't do a thing to your precious engines, Boo," said Deen, "all I did was add an ST box so the port will read our transponder signal as the Imperial driver's. Standard Operating Procedure, straight out of Cracken's Field Guide—I do it all the time."

"Yeah, well, you seemed to be getting pretty close to my cobulators with that hydrospanner ..."

“Oh, quit griping and hail the port—we’re practically on top of them.”

Boo Rawl shrugged and opened a channel. “Kuat Freight Port, this is Drive Craft 36DD, requesting permission to link with the barge in ...” Boo paused to check a datapad. “Loading dock 42.”

“*Drive craft, your transponder signal is unclear,*” said a cold voice from the station, “*Please transmit clearance code to confirm your identity.*”

Boo gave Deen a pointed stare as he sent out the code. “Uh, sorry about the transponder, Kuat,” he said, “new tech on board was tweaking the sublights, obviously got a little carried away.”

“*Identity confirmed,*” answered the controller, uninterested in Boo’s explanations. “*Driver DeeDee, you are early. Link techs will be at dock 42 at 1430.*”

Boo turned again to Deen, who gestured innocence but said nothing.

“Ah, are you sure about that, Kuat?” asked Boo. “My orders say pickup at 1230.”

“*I will check, DeeDee,*” said the controller.

Boo shut off the comm. “Isn’t that one of your aunt’s people?”

Deen nodded.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I dunno ...”

Kuat hailed the driver: “*It seems you are right, driver DeeDee,*” said the controller. “*You are listed for 1230 ...*”

Deen smirked at Boo.

“*However, there will be a slight delay—the techs’ orders say 1430. They will be back on duty within the hour.*”

“No problem, Kuat, I’ll wait,” said Boo. He shut down the comm again. “Now what?” he asked Deen.

“We wait for the techs to finish lunch, like you said.”

Boo rolled his eyes. “What if Security decides to visit us while we’re waiting?”

"Boo, you worry as much as my friend Voren," said Deen. "Security'll be on break too."

"Yeah, off playing Whack-a-Bothan, or Bobbing for Calamari." Boo sighed. "I hate waiting," he said.

"Finally! I thought they'd take forever!" said Boo as they received the signal that the last of the linking clamps had secured the cargo container to the barge driver. "Kuat, this is driver *DeeDee*," he said, cutting off the latest scarlet-rated offering of *Billi B and the Paradise Gang* and hailing the station. "I've linked up to the barge here, and I'd like to check the cargo before I leave."

"Go ahead, *DeeDee*."

"All right, Deen," Boo said as he cut the comm. "She's all ours. Let's take a quick peek and vanish before the real barge driver *DeeDee* shows up."

Deen entered the airlock connecting the access hatch on the cargo container.

"Is the generator all right?" asked Boo as Deen entered the hold.

"The generator is huge—you don't really want me to spend two days inspecting ... Wait a ..."

"What?"

"I saw something move ..."

"Hi, Deen!" said Shannon, popping into view. "Is this the generator you wanted?"

"Shannon!"

"Who's the kid?" Boo asked.

"My cousin ... Shannon, does your mother know you're in here?"

"Of course not. We'd better get moving."

"We?" said Deen. "What do you mean, we?"

"I'm joining the Rebellion," she answered, hauling out her portable computer. "Now come on, we've got to go."

“Absolutely not,” said Deen. “You are going straight back home.”

“How?” said Boo. “The dock’s been depressurized, and I’m not too thrilled with the idea of calling the techs back, having them unlink us and re-pressurize the dock, explaining the kid to Security, and then waiting to get linked up again. I’m not crazy about dragging some poor kid into danger, but we have no choice. She’s on for the haul.”

“He’s right,” said Shannon, climbing into the driver cab. “Close those hatches and let’s go!”

“But ...” Deen began.

“The Imperial driver will be here in ... less than 30 minutes,” said Shannon, checking her chrono. “Set our coordinates for hyperspace, comrade,” she told Boo.

“Name’s Boo. Now keep quiet, kid, I gotta talk to your mom’s folks.”

Shannon nodded. Deen stood in shock.

“Kuat, this is barge driver *DeeDee*. My cargo is secure and I’m ready to go.”

“*Affirmative, Driver DeeDee,*” said the controller. “*You may leave port when ready; thank you for choosing Kuat Engineering, and please be careful of repair drones on your way out.*”

“No problem, Kuat,” said Boo, “and thanks for everything.” He began piloting the barge away from the dock. “This is almost too easy,” he said. “Deen, your aunt is the best ...”

“What did she have to do with it?” asked Shannon. “I set the whole thing up!”

“What do you mean, you set it up?” asked Deen.

“Mom was too scared to help you—you knew that, Deen,” Shannon said. “So I changed the pickup time.”

“And Aunt Nell ...”

“Doesn’t know a thing.”

Boo was astonished. “The kid set this up? I’m impressed. Great cousin you got here, Deen. Though it would’ve been nice if she’d gotten the techs here sooner.”

“Sorry, Boo, I, uh, sort of forgot to change their orders,” said Shannon. “How long ‘till we can jump?”

“We’ve just cleared tractor beam range—let me get past that one drive craft ... Aw, no, I don’t believe it!”

“What?” asked Shannon.

“See ahead? That’s the real barge driver *36DD*, come to pick up the generator.”

“You sure?” asked Deen.

The comm light flashed. “*Unknown Driver*,” said the controller, “*return to dock immediately.*” The three Rebels looked at each other.

“Keep going,” said Deen.

“Repeat,” said the controller, “*unknown Driver, return your barge to dock and you will not be harmed.*”

“Yeah right,” muttered Boo.

The Imperial drive craft positioned itself between the Rebels and the spacelane.

“Get around it!” said Shannon.

“How?” said Boo. “The *Long Run* ain’t no snub-fighter—linked to a loaded barge, it moves like a drunken Hutt ...”

“What’s its shield tolerance like?” asked Deen, pointing out the viewport, where at least a dozen TIE fighters were converging on them.

“Oh, beautiful,” said Boo, “I knew this was too easy.”

The comm light blinked again. “*Unidentified Driver*,” said a familiar female voice, “*this is Senior Controller Voorson with your final warning. Reverse your heading and return to dock 42, or our security forces will open fire.*”

“Lovely,” Boo muttered. “Deen, take the guns. Blast anything between us and freedom.”

“Wait,” said Deen, “I have an idea—Shannon, follow my lead,” he said, slapping the comm panel.

“Controller Voorson,” he said, “call off your attack. We have your daughter.” He nudged Shannon.

“Mom, Mom, it’s me! Don’t shoot!” she said.

The comm panel was silent.

“You think that’ll stop ’em?” Shannon asked.

Laser blasts bounced off the driver’s shields.

“There’s your answer,” said Boo. “Take the guns, Deen!”

Deen hit the firing buttons. The small turbolasers managed to hit two oncoming TIEs, and three more were disabled by flying debris. Deen kept firing.

“Rebel Driver,” said Nell Voorson, her voice touched with panic, “turn back now. Security will not permit you to escape.”

“We ain’t askin’ for permission!” shouted Boo, continuing to plow forward. A TIE’s solar panel clipped their shields; the TIE flew apart, colliding with one of its fellows.

“Boo, the shields are gonna go any second,” said Deen, still blasting at their attackers.

“Rebel barge driver,” said Nell Voorson, “this is pointless. Stop now or be destroyed ...”

“Sorry, Auntie, there’s no going back now!” said Boo.

“Rebel ... Deen!” Nell pleaded. “Deen, think of what you’re doing—think of Shannon—Security won’t listen to me!” she shouted, “they won’t let you go!”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Nell,” Deen began.

“Watch the TIEs!” Boo warned; the stream of tiny fighters continued to pour at them.

“We’re gonna hit that driver!” Shannon cried as the Imperial barge *36DD* loomed before them.

“Not if they’re smarter than we are,” said Boo.

Deen bit his lip and Shannon covered her eyes as the drivers converged. Nell Voorson’s voice continued to beg for sanity over the comm panel. A bead of sweat rolled down Boo’s face. “I don’t think they’re gonna ...”

At the last moment, the Imperial driver ducked beneath the *Long Run*. Their shields brushed, buckled, and collapsed as they zoomed past the other ship and into clear space. Four laser bolts from four different TIEs burst past the *Long Run* just as Boo pulled the jump levers; all three Rebels held their breath as the starlines merged into the blur of hyperspace.

“Are we safe now, Boo, are we safe?” asked Shannon.

“Depends on two things,” said Boo. “First, whether or not your mother called ahead to Venir or Renegg for Interdictors ...”

“And whether or not we hit somebody,” Deen finished.

Shannon crept into her cousin’s lap and laid her head on his shoulder. All three Rebels remained tense, silent, waiting for either a fatal crash or a jerk out of hyperspace into Imperial custody.

The minutes dragged on. Shannon realized that, whether she lived or died, she would never see her parents again; she began to cry. Deen held her close, wiping her tears and rocking her.

“Hey,” said Boo softly, “it’s been 30 minutes. We’re clear.”

“We’re away?” said Shannon.

Boo nodded. “Free and clear, kid—welcome to the Alliance.”

“Little Bit,” said Deen, “I’m sorry I got you into this ...”

“I’m not,” said Shannon, putting on a smile. “Come on, now, Deen—let’s go slay some dragons.”



# **Do No Harm**

## **by Erin Endom**

It all seemed pretty straightforward the day I was called into Commander Briessen's office. "Temporary detached duty," he called it. Naturally I wondered what kind of detached duty a hospital-ship medic warranted, but I didn't have to wonder very long—only until Lieutenant Haslam showed up.

I have to say he didn't look like a topnotch commando. A couple of centimeters taller than I, light brown hair thinning on top, pale blue eyes, roundish face, slender build; he looked like an accountant. But everyone in the Rebellion knew his reputation by then. What could he possibly want with me?

I found out in short order. Gebnerret Vibrion, the political head of another Rebel cell, had been captured by the Imps and was undergoing interrogation on Selnesh, a notorious prison planet in the Irishi Sector. He knew too much to be left in custody; he had to be either broken out or killed quickly. Okay, I could understand that. I hadn't been with the Rebellion very long, but even I knew that given enough time, anyone could and would break under interrogation: physical torture, drugs, threats

to loved ones—everyone has a breaking point. So where did a medic come into the picture? It turned out Vibrion was a rather elderly human male with Zithrom’s syndrome, a kidney problem requiring him to take continuous doses of Clondex in order to stay alive. It was a pretty sure bet the Imps wouldn’t be taking tender care of his medical problems. Even worse, before he died he’d go into delirium. And who knew what secrets he’d give away then?

So I reported to the mission briefing with no small amount of apprehension. I hadn’t joined the Rebellion for a life of adventure; I’d signed on to save lives. (Skies, that sounds pompous. It’s more accurate to say I’d signed on for a steady job doing what I’m good at, for the benefit of the Good Guys.) I felt even more out of place when I met the other team members, commandos all: Melenna, a tiny, cheerful, exquisitely beautiful woman with a cap of loose golden curls and the coldest blue eyes I’ve ever seen; Gowan, a big dark guy, definitely the strong silent type; Enkhet, a tall, skinny, pale kid whose appearance fairly screamed “slicer”; Liak, a (relatively) small Wookiee with long golden-brown fur and an almost palpable aura of calm about him; and Haslam, regarding us all with his coolly analytical gaze.

“The plan,” he said after a long moment, “is to get in, get Vibrion, and get out as quietly as possible. We’re not going to take down the Interrogation Center; we’re not going to slaughter Imps; we’re not out for glory. We’re gonna get Vibrion. Period.”

His tone of voice was making me uneasy. “Get him in what sense?” I asked.

“In whatever sense we have to,” Haslam replied calmly. “If we can evacuate him, fine. If we can’t, we can give him a quicker and easier death than the Imps will, and we can keep him from talking. Have you got a problem with that, *Doctor* Leith?” He stressed the title just a little.

Actually, I did. I could see his point: burdened with a nonambulatory rescuee, there was almost no chance the team would make it out intact. On the other hand, I was a doctor, and

my job was to do everything I could to save my patient. I kept my mouth shut for the moment, but the twisting sensation in the pit of my stomach was picking up considerably.

“So,” he addressed the others. “Basic very-dumb-orphan scoop-and-run—you’ve done it a hundred times. We infiltrate the center incognito—Melenna, Liak, you’re the prisoners; standard smugglers-suspected-of-Rebel-sympathies scenario. Gowan and Enkhet are storm-trooper guards, I’m the officer in charge. Aurin—” he turned to me, “you’ll have to be another prisoner. You’re taking passage with Melenna and Liak to Sestooine, you’ve been picked up by mistake, and you don’t know anything about anything. Just keep your mouth shut and you’ll do fine. How much equipment will you need to bring?”

Luckily I’d had the foresight to think this out ahead of time. “I can manage with one medpac,” I replied a little shortly. “I’ll need to pack it with extra Clondex and some special equipment.”

“Good. We’ll get to the prison sector, find out where he is, then get rid of the guards and break into his cell. Once we get in, your job is to get him alert and moving quickly if at all possible. If you can’t, we’ll have to ... break out without him.” The others nodded casually; I had the feeling his hesitation was entirely for my benefit. “Once he’s up, we get back to the shuttle. For this part, we’ll take the repair access tunnels.” He touched a button on the tabletop console, and a holographic schematic of an Imperial-style installation leaped out of the center of the table; another adjustment, and a series of passages were outlined in red. The route from the prison cells to the docking bays was long, tortuous, and confusing.

Melenna chuckled. “This is where Liak comes in. His people are tree-dwellers; he can find his way through any strange maze of branches with never a wrong turn. For some reason it works on space stations as well. We don’t understand it, but we don’t argue with it.”

“The tractor beam’s just a single,” Haslam continued. “Weak design—says they don’t think anyone can escape. Gowan, you’ll

break into the main computer and disengage it while our medic here is fixing Vibrion. At full power and with some of Enkhet's fancy shiphandling, we should be able to break free long enough to make the jump to hyperspace. Questions?"

If anyone else had any, they weren't admitting it; the only response was a series of crisp nods from the other team members. I had one, and it was bothering me enough that I didn't even react to the interesting fact that Gowan and not Enkhet was the computer jock. Haslam looked at me sharply, but only said, "Okay, dismissed. We'll meet outside the shuttle at 0600 tomorrow, bay 36. Get some sleep, everyone. Aurin, stay a moment, please."

Once we were alone, I said, "You left something out of the briefing. What if I can't get him moving? I don't think you mean for us to just go off and leave him alive. Who gets to do the dirty deed?"

"Frankly, I'd rather have a medical droid along," Haslam said coolly. "Put a glitch in its programming, and it does exactly what the mission calls for and it doesn't develop any moral scruples at the last minute. Unfortunately, Emdees are expensive. Human medics are a lot cheaper and easier to replace."

"Nice to know I'm expendable," I murmured under my breath. Haslam ignored the comment, but after a moment some of the coldness faded from his face, leaving a look of—almost—helplessness.

"Aurin, I don't get any thrill out of killing. I've got a job to do here, just like you. The fact is, we can't leave him to die at the hands of the Imperials, or of his disease. And it's not just because of the information he'll spill. Interrogation is ... well, not a pleasant way to die. I want to get him out as much as you do, but it may not be possible. The question is, if it comes to that—can you give him something to make it quick and easy for him?"

"You're asking me to kill him. I can't do that." If I was sure of nothing else in this confusion, I was sure of that much. Apart from any other considerations, I'd sworn an oath before they let

me out of the Byblos Academy of Medicine: boiled down, it consisted of “*First, do no harm.*”

Haslam wasn’t surprised. “Okay,” he sighed, “it’s my responsibility. I’ll take care of it.” Then, in a whisper, “Blast it, I wish they wouldn’t do this to me.”

I hesitated. I didn’t like the train of thought developing in my mind: *Look, if the guy’s gonna die anyway, isn’t it your job as a physician to make sure it’s as easy as possible? If we can’t get him out, Haslam is gonna shoot him. If you can’t square your conscience enough to overdose him with potassium and make it fast and painless, can you at least sedate him enough so he sleeps through it?*

*But that means I’m helping Haslam kill him. I’m being dragged along on this mission to save his life if it’s at all possible, not to help end it.*

*You’re on this mission to serve your patient as best you can, whether it means saving his life or helping him die as easily as possible.*

*Skies, I hate this!*

“I can give him some conergin,” I heard myself saying abruptly. I was dimly surprised to hear that my voice was flat, steady; my insides certainly weren’t. “It won’t kill him, but it’ll put him down deep enough to let you do what you have to.”

Haslam looked up sharply. “You’ll help me?”

“I’ll help you. But only after I’ve tried everything I can to get him moving and out of there. And this is a medical problem, not a military one. It has to be my decision. Not yours.” I held his eyes with my own, feeling sick. “If that’s not acceptable, you and the Rebellion can find yourselves another medic. Or a droid.”

“Done,” Haslam replied, grasping my wrist as if closing a business deal. Which, of course, we were.

The flight to Selnesh was relatively short, only four days in hyperspace. Of course, four days with the dilemma I had hanging over my head is an eternity and then some. I spent them packing and repacking my medpac for greatest efficiency, mentally reviewing the resuscitation plan, and getting used to the weight

of the hold-out blaster up my left sleeve. Melenna had handed it to me just after boarding as a matter of course.

“Wait!” I’d blurted. “I don’t want this. I don’t even know how to use it.”

“Real simple.” Melenna shrugged. “Point and shoot.”

“But I don’t want it! I’m a doctor! I don’t shoot people!”

“This go-around, you may have to.” Disgustedly, Melenna pushed up my tunic sleeve, fastened the little holster around my forearm, and snapped it down with a final-sounding click. “If you can’t, don’t. Just try not to shoot any of us, okay?”

We popped back into normal space over Selnesh about the mid-afternoon of the fourth day. If I’d set out to build a prison planet from the core outward, this would have been it: a gray rocky ball in the middle of nowhere, its sun no more than a bright bluish star. “Bleak” did not even begin to describe it. The surface was totally bare of color or vegetation. The sterile white plasteel dome of the prison sat like a fungus directly below us as we descended. There was literally nowhere else to go on this world that would support life for more than a few hours. I could see why nobody escaped from here.

While Enkhet, already in his stormtrooper armor, exchanged code strings and pleasantries with the docking bay, the rest of us lined up in preparation for deception. Melenna wore free-trader’s gear, Liak only his fur, and I a plain civilian tunic and trousers; the precious medpac was fastened around my waist under the loose, long tunic. All three of us wore wrist binders. Gowan, also in armor, held a blaster rifle carefully pointed at the floor. Haslam was in a gray officer’s uniform and looked, at least to me, thoroughly official and intimidating.

The jar of landing in the bay was slight; evidently Enkhet was as good a pilot as everyone said he was. I clenched my fists tightly, the cut of the binders into my wrists announcing, *I don’t like this. I want to go home. Right now. I’m not cut out for a life of adventure.* Somehow sensing my nervousness, Liak turned around

and growled something incomprehensible but reassuring-sounding.

“Pretend you’re in a holovid,” Melenna suggested brightly. “Playing the part of a prisoner. That’s what I do. Just don’t say anything. Let the Lieutenant do the talking—it’s what he’s here for.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. Nerves always take me in the stomach, and mine was turning somersaults just then. Better the stomach than the hands, anyway—a doctor had better have steady hands, whether she’s nervous or not.

Enkhet joined us from the cockpit. “All clear,” he announced casually. “No challenge. They sound bored.”

“Good enough,” observed Haslam. “Let’s move out.”

Getting past the docking bay was a lot easier than I’d expected. Haslam, doing a perfect imitation of an Imperial officer—clipped speech, formal stance and all—identified himself as one Lieutenant Grallant, operating number 13398247, and us as smugglers and possible Rebel sympathizers. The base commander, who looked as if he’d heard it all one too many times before, waved us tiredly back toward the passage I figured had to lead to the holding area.

We filed down the gray hallway, ending up in a large bay with cell-lined hallways branching off at regular intervals. The central computer bank was inhabited by four stormtroopers holding blaster rifles at least as big as the ones Enkhet and Gowan wielded, and a crisply pressed officer type wearing captain’s insignia who looked a whole lot more alert than his commander. The officer glanced up as we came in, and the troopers all shifted slightly to aim their rifles not precisely at us but definitely in our direction. I suddenly found it harder to breathe. Part of my brain was seriously considering saying “Count me out, thanks, I don’t want to play anymore,” turning around and walking back to the

ship. Since this would have ruined Haslam's pretty scenario, and I was too frozen to move anyway, I kept still and silent.

Haslam repeated the name-rank-and-operating number business for the officer, who (thank the skies) didn't seem inclined to be challenging. Instead, he helpfully fired up the computer and assigned the three of us cell numbers. Prisoner processing apparently took place inside the cells, rather than in the open area—to reduce the incidence of breaks, I guessed. Since a break was precisely what we had planned, I didn't find this information encouraging.

Enkhet pressed the muzzle of his blaster into my back, pushing me forward. Captain Whoever stepped forward to help get us hardened criminals into cells for processing. Haslam stopped him with an upraised hand.

"I'm going to have to ask you and your men to leave for a few minutes."

"What?" the captain asked blankly.

"I need you and your men to leave the area temporarily." Haslam spoke even more quietly, with an air of complicity. "I'm with Intelligence. We suspect these prisoners have had access to top-secret information about the movements of various Rebel cells. It's not that we don't trust a loyal Imperial officer, but the presence of these prisoners here has to be kept absolutely top secret until interrogation is complete. I'm sure you understand."

"Does Commander Caton know about this?"

"No, and it's important to the war effort that no one knows just now. I can't tell you any more. I shouldn't even have said this much. The reason I brought them here is because I know the reputation of this base's officers and men. There's no more secure place in the galaxy."

"I understand," the captain said gravely, and motioned the troopers to follow him out the door. Evidently flattery went a long way.



"I'll also have to disable the security cameras temporarily. Just until they're processed, you understand. No one must know of their presence here."

"Understood." And it was as easy as that. The Imps simply walked out and closed the doors behind them. Gowan, helmet off, was already slicing into the computer; after a moment, the cameras mounted around the ceiling went dark.

Haslam moved lightly around the room checking for I didn't know what, while Enkhet removed our binders. Melenna stretched her arms and hands forward to remove the stiffness. "You didn't have to tighten them quite so much," she complained mildly. "My hands are asleep."

"You're the one wanted to be convincing."

Liak growled an admonishment, and the squabble—probably the latest chapter in an ongoing saga—ceased. Meanwhile, I was digging into my medpac again, assuring myself one more time that none of the precious equipment or drug vials was damaged. The ticklish clenching of my muscles, the usual prelude to a full-bore resuscitation, was beginning to push through my fear. "Where is he?" I demanded.

"I'm looking," Gowan replied absently, his attention entirely occupied by the flashing images on the screen. "Okay, here it is. Cell 2826."

"Well, come on, let's go!"

"Aurin," Haslam spoke quietly. "I'm in command of this mission. We go when I say."

"Haslam," I said in the same tone, "you got us past the Imps. Now it's a medical mission. That's my department, remember? There's a man dying in one of these cells. I've got work to do. Let me do it." The words "or else" hung in the air. I didn't know quite what "or else" would involve, but Haslam realized I was serious anyway. He half-laughed, half-sighed, and gave the move-out signal.

The cell was at the far end of the center hallway. While Enkhet stood guard near the hall entrance—Gowan had stayed behind to

compute some more—Haslam entered a complex code into the keypad at the side of the door. It slid open to reveal a thin, gray-haired human male lying on the pallet at the far end of the small room. He rose half up on one elbow, eyes widening at the sight of us. I absorbed details as I moved quickly to his side, unstrapping the medpac from around my waist: he was very pale, his eyes sunken and his lips dry, indicating dehydration, but he was awake, alert and aware. I'd been prepared for a patient at death's door, and was surprised at how relatively good he looked.

"Is this the rescue party?" His voice was soft and hoarse, but held a hint of wry humor.

"That's us." Melenna had followed close behind me, and gave him a dazzling smile I suspected would get any man off a deathbed in short order. She'd probably intended it that way. "Anything to make the mission a success," she'd commented briefly during the ride in. If flirting with the rescuee would help, she'd do it.

"I wasn't ... expecting you." He had to breathe in the middle of the short sentence; yes, he needed some help. During the exchange I had been rapidly unpacking my equipment; now I placed the IAU—Intravenous Access Unit—on his upper chest and pressed the activation switch. While the catheter burrowed through his skin in search of the large subclavian vein leading directly to his heart, I opened two ampules of Clondex, one of endogenous steroid, a cordine patch, and a liter of serum-replacement solution, and laid them down ready to hand. Liak crouched beside me, ready to help if needed; Haslam stayed alert at the door.

"Hey," Melenna remarked, "never underestimate the power of a woman."

"You're in better shape than I thought you'd be," I commented as I worked.

"I had three vials of ... Clondex when I got here ... been underdosing myself. I only ... ran out two days ago."

“How’d you get them past the body search?” Melenna demanded.

“Swallowed them.” Weak as he was, Vibrion winked at her. Melenna followed this statement to its logical conclusion and grimaced; funny, I wouldn’t have thought her the squeamish type. I ran the scanner over his body, noting the small heart—another sign of dehydration—and the shrunken kidneys and adrenals, which went along with the Zithrom’s. Blood pressure was a little low, heart rate a little fast, but otherwise everything looked pretty normal. I allowed myself a sigh of relief. *This isn’t going to be as bad as I thought, thank the skies. And remember, the next time Briessen wants to send you out on one of these things, say no.*

The IAU clicked, and a backflow of darkish venous blood appeared in its access chamber, indicating the catheter was in the vein. I injected the first unit of Clondex and the steroid rapidly, then started feeding in the serum solution as fast as I could. I had to be careful here; giving a large volume of fluid too fast could tip him over the other way into lung and kidney failure.

“How’re we doing?” Haslam asked. “We’ve gotta move out soon.”

“I need a few more minutes. Have they caught on to us?”

“No sign yet,” he said, “but let’s not push our luck. Liak, go open the access tunnel entrance and stand by.” Liak lumbered up from my side and out the door, ruffling my hair with his big paw as he passed.

The fluid bag was nearly empty; I squeezed it to get the last few drops into my patient, then disconnected it. Already Vibrion was looking better, his eyes less sunken and color coming back into his face. I gave him the second round of Clondex, then slapped the cordine patch onto his neck. He flushed red, a hand going shakily to his forehead as the stimulant took hold.

“The headache will pass in a minute,” I said. “This’ll help you keep up. We need to get out of here. Can you sit up?”

Vibrion nodded, wincing as I helped him to a sitting position and rechecked his blood pressure; it was holding steady. So far, so good.

“Liak’s got the tunnel open,” Haslam said, calmly but with a note of underlying urgency in his voice. I hauled Vibrion to a standing position, Melenna stepping in to get a shoulder under his arm for support, and rechecked the scanner’s readings; his pulse had gone up 10 beats per minute to compensate for the change in body position, but blood pressure remained stable.

“Okay?” I asked him.

“Okay.” He smiled wanly. “Let’s go.”

The access tunnel ran parallel along the hallway, a brightly lit, dusty passage just tall enough to stand up in (Liak and Enkhet had to slouch) and just wide enough for one. Melenna, Vibrion and I, linked in the tail position, shuffled sideways. Liak led, followed by Enkhet and Gowan; Haslam was in the middle, where he could monitor everyone at once. It was slow going, with a couple of back-up-and-start-over maneuvers at first. I hadn’t the slightest idea where we were going, and wasn’t sure if I cared. I’d done what I came to do, and the post-code ebb of unused adrenaline had left me drained, flat, and hungry. Melenna, on the other hand, was looking keyed-up and nervous.

“This is taking too long,” she hissed at Haslam, just ahead of her. “How long do you think it’ll be before the Imps figure out something’s up? They’re not all idiots, you know.”

“I’m aware of that, Melenna,” Haslam said with careful calm. “It’s only been eleven minutes. We have time.” Eleven minutes? How could it only have been eleven minutes? It felt like hours since I’d walked into that cell.

Liak grunted something from the head of the line, and we kept shuffling along. I glanced repeatedly up at Vibrion, reassessing his condition; after a few minutes he was dripping sweat—it was hot in the tunnel—and noticeably paler as the cordine flush wore

off, but he gently squeezed my shoulders and kept moving. It occurred to me that fragile as the old man appeared, anyone who—at his age, and burdened by chronic illness—could found and run an entire cell of the Rebellion had to be tougher than tempered titanium. He was certainly proving it now.

After a long few minutes more of this business, we all stopped at a signal from Liak: we were nearing the docking bay. The plan was to throw a concussion grenade into the bay while we remained under cover in the tunnel; with the guards incapacitated and the tractor beam hopefully deactivated, we would scurry to our stolen shuttle, take off, and evade pursuit long enough to complete the run-to-jump for hyperspace.

At least, that was the theory.

We all crouched down on the dusty floor of the tunnel, except Vibrion, who sat down rather suddenly, as if his legs would no longer hold him. Melenna propped him up against the wall while I scrabbled in the medpac for another cordine patch. I wasn't sure of the wisdom of giving him another round—it might send him into heart failure—but I wanted it handy if he did need it. A flash of white caught the corner of my eye at the far curve of the corridor, and I glanced up.

A stormtrooper, flattened against the curving wall, was just edging around the corner, blaster up and pointed directly at me.

*Ambush*, I thought, very coldly and clearly, as time slowed to a halt around me. I couldn't seem to get in a breath—the nauseated stunned emptiness was almost exactly what I'd felt at age six, after falling off a balcony flat onto my stomach. But my mind, trained to function logically in a crisis, kept clicking right along: *There isn't time to warn Haslam. You're blocking the others—they can't shoot around you. If you fall, Vibrion's next in line.*

*You've got a blaster.*

My right hand pulled the little hold-out blaster from its holster under my left sleeve, leveled it at the trooper, and fired. The shot angled upward just enough to pass between the breastplate and the bottom of the helmet; it took him square in the throat, and

he let out a choked gurgle and dropped to his knees. His helmet flew off as he went down, allowing me a brief glimpse of a very young man, light brown hair damp with sweat and clinging to his skull, clear gray eyes wide in amazement, before he toppled flat onto his face.

I had just time to be amazed that I'd actually hit him before I was surrounded by blaster shots: Haslam and the others had caught on to the fact that something was going on behind us, and were shooting over my head in a perfectly choreographed blast-and-duck pattern that said they'd been in situations like this before. The rest of the troopers, their cover blown, had moved around the corner into the open and were blasting away at us. I started to turn back, with some confused idea of shielding Vibrion with my body, but Melenna hissed at me, "*Stay down!*"

Her statement was punctuated by a dull, but extremely loud, explosion from the direction of the docking bay that shook the walls around us. I swallowed to equalize the pressure in my ears and got off a couple of random shots toward the troopers, at the same time groping behind me with my left hand for Vibrion's wrist. His pulse was rapid and slightly irregular, but strong; he squeezed my hand in weak reassurance.

During all this, I'd forgotten to try to breathe again. I gasped, and air rushed into my lungs, making me suddenly dizzy. I dropped my forehead onto my wrist; curled awkwardly in a semi-fetal position on the floor, there wasn't much else I was capable of. I stayed there, clutching Vibrion's hand, until someone sharply wrenched at my shoulder.

"Come on!" a voice shouted roughly. "We're going!"

I looked up to see Gowan bending over me, helmet off and a charred crease of blaster burn slanting across his forehead where a bolt had winged him. He grasped my wrist, hauled me to my feet, and slung me forward toward the docking bay. Behind us lay only a heap of white armor, the gray-eyed boy hidden beneath his comrades. The floor of the bay was similarly littered with the limp bodies of troopers and officers, all knocked unconscious

simultaneously by the blast of Liak's concussion grenade. Haslam, at the entrance waiting for us, grabbed my arm and dragged me up the shuttle ramp just behind Melenna and Vibrion; he was leaning heavily on her shoulder, knees buckling and plainly on the verge of collapse. Gowan, following us in, hit the door latch and headed for the cockpit at a dead run; the engines were already roaring in startup sequence. Haslam dumped Vibrion and me onto the passenger seat, rapidly strapped us in, then turned to follow Melenna aft.

"Where are you going?" I gasped.

"To man the guns," he flung back over his shoulder, not missing a step.

"Guns? I thought shuttles didn't have guns!"

No answer but the jolting rise of the craft; then we were flung backwards by the steep drag of acceleration as the shuttle shot forward. The next few minutes were a rough approximation of a whirling repulsorlift ride I'd gone on once during a Coruscant Fete Week: moving straight up, down, sideways, in a corkscrew, and several less-conceivable directions, all at breakneck speed, in pitch darkness (the cabin lights had gone out during the second high-speed maneuver), and this time with the added thrill of people shooting at us. I could dimly hear Haslam and Melenna's casual crosstalk as they shot back; evidently this shuttle did have guns. Vibrion was too far away for me to reach, but sat crumpled in his restraints, his eyes sunken again into his head but sparkling. People say emergency medics are excitement junkies, but this was getting ridiculous. Haslam was right about Enkhet's piloting, though; even I could tell he was doing a superb job of keeping us in one piece. Finally the ride turned into a high-gravity Aurin sandwich, pressing the breath out of my lungs as the shuttle made the star-stretching jump to hyperspace.

The next few minutes were a blur, as I got Vibrion settled more comfortably and gave him some more fluid and another half-dose of Clondex. Haslam had taken a blaster shot to the left shoulder, which had managed to miss the great vessels and nerve

plexus; I cleaned and dressed his and Gowan's wounds. Melenna, who'd been in plain view of the troopers and without armor or any other form of protection, didn't have a scratch on her.

"That's why we keep her around," Enkhet quipped cheerfully, strolling into the common room from the cockpit. "She's our luck." Melenna thumped him lightly on the top of the head with a derisive chuckle, and Enkhet tugged teasingly on a curling golden strand.

I finished Haslam's dressing and was halfway through repacking the medpac, thinking a hot drink sounded like a good idea, when the shakes hit. I always get a little trembly after a code; usually it passes off after a few seconds, but this time it got steadily worse. I knelt on the deck-plates in the corner of the common room, face turned to the wall, while the ugly, jeering thoughts crawled around in my brain.

*You shot that trooper. You killed him. I thought you were supposed to be a doctor, remember?*

*I had to! It was him or us.*

*Yeah, right. All that pious moralizing about your oaths, and do no harm, and the sanctity of sentient life—and none of it really meant anything did it?*

*It wasn't just me, not just my own life. I had a patient to protect. I had the whole group to protect.*

*Oh, come off it! You had to protect them? Who appointed you Hero of the Universe? Face it—you can mouth off all you want to about morality, but when it comes right down to it, you took a life. You're not a healer, you're a killer.*

"Aurin?"

A hand touched my shoulder, and I turned. Gowan knelt next to me, looking tired and battered and absurdly young, open concern in his dark eyes. I just looked at him, unable to get any words around the hessa-ball that had suddenly taken up residence in my throat.

"You know," he said slowly, "you did a good job in there."



"I killed him." A deep breath let me speak, but couldn't keep the tremor out of my voice.

"I know. And I'm sorry you had to ... but I can't say I'm sorry you did." His voice was even, quiet. "Listen to me. Aurin ... this is a war. The point of war is that if you can kill enough of the people on the other side, they'll quit. That's a hard thing to live with. What's even harder is, sometimes people get caught up in the killing who don't really belong there. And I think you're one of those people."

"You can say that again." A shaky half-laugh, half-sob escaped me. "I'm supposed to keep people alive, not ... this."

"Exactly. And that's what makes what you did today so valuable. The Rebellion doesn't have anything like as many troops as the Empire does. If we can't stay alive long enough to win this war, we've thrown our lives away. Look at it this way: you helped keep all of us alive a little longer to fight this thing. And you kept Vibron alive, and that's even more important, just because of who he is. Because he can bring in others who believe what we're doing is right."

I hadn't expected such gentleness, such eloquence out of this dark man who had barely spoken during the entire mission. The hard knot in my throat promptly dissolved into tears. Gowan put an awkward arm around my shoulders as I cried, hot tears of shame, of self-recrimination, of grief, and of sheer reaction to the events of the day.

The tensions and pain gradually drained out of my body along with the tears. After a few minutes I simply stopped crying and slumped exhausted against the wall, dashed my sleeve across my eyes and smiled shakily up at Gowan.

"I'm okay now. Really," I added at his doubtful look. "Sorry I cried all over you. I'd just ... like to be alone for a while."

He nodded and stood up. "Do you want anything? A drink?"

"Not now, thank you."

He nodded and moved forward toward the cockpit.

"Gowan?"

He turned.

“Thanks.”

He nodded again and walked away. I just sat there for a while, eyes closed, mind drifting. For the most part, I’d done what I came to do. I’d gotten Vibrion out of the prison alive; I’d made it out myself, and so had the rest of the team. And if all that was partly due to my having violated my oath to do no harm ... well, maybe allowances could be made for having done a wrong thing for a right reason. Maybe the pretty rules of medicine don’t hold up as well in war. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now ... except to wish that gray-eyed boy oneness with the Force that binds us all, and to go on with my life and my job as best I could. I sighed, got up—aching like the aftermath of a stun blast—and went in search of that hot drink.

They gave me a medal when we got back—the Field Achievement Award, the one they give all the field operatives who make it back from their first mission. I still have it. I threw it in a drawer and haven’t looked at it since. But like a half-healed wound, I always know it’s there.

# Side Trip Part One

## by Timothy Zahn

The hazy edge of the planet was just disappearing from beneath the *Hopskip*'s control room viewport, and Haber Trell was trying to nurse a little more power from the ship's as-always finicky engines, when his partner finally reappeared from her tour aft. "Took you long enough," Trell commented as she dropped into the copilot seat beside him. "Any trouble?"

"No more than usual," Maranne Darmic told him, digging a hand underneath the silvered clasp tying her darkblond hair back out of the way and scratching vigorously at her scalp. "The cargo straps managed to hold through that classic signature liftoff of yours. I'd say we didn't get rid of all the itch mites in the hold, though."

"Never mind the vermin," Trell growled. Next time they had a twenty-grade unbalanced cargo, he promised himself darkly, he'd make *her* do the liftoff. See how smoothly *she* managed it. "How about our passengers?"

Maranne sniffed. "I thought you didn't want to hear about vermin."

"Watch it, kiddo," Trell warned. "They're paying good money for us to smuggle these blasters out to Derra IV."

"And obviously don't trust us ten centimeters with them," Maranne countered. "They wouldn't be babysitting them like this if they did."

Trell shrugged. "Can't say I really blame them for being cautious. Ever since that big defeat or whatever it was out in the Yavin system, the Empire's been spitting fire in fifteen directions at once. I've heard that some of the independents hauling Rebellion stuff decided it was safer to take the advance money, dump the cargo, and burn space for better havens."

"Yeah, well, I don't like hauling for desperate people," Maranne said, shifting the focal point of her scratching to a spot farther down the back of her neck. "They make me nervous."

"If they weren't desperate, they wouldn't be paying so well," Trell pointed out reasonably. "Don't worry, this'll be the last time we have to deal with them."

"I've heard *that* before," Maranne said, sniffing again. The proximity-sensor alert began to warble, and she leaned forward to key for a readout. "Sure, this'll pay for the engine upgrades you want; but then you'll want sensor upgrades, and—"

She broke off. "What?" Trell demanded.

"Star Destroyer," she said grimly, activating the weapons section of her board and keying in the power boosters. "Coming up fast behind us."

"Terrific," Trell growled, checking the nav computer. If they could escape to lightspeed ... but no, the ship was still too close to the planet. "What's their vector?"

"Straight toward us," Maranne told him. "I suppose it's too late to dump the cargo and try to look innocent."

"Freighter *Hopskip*, this is Captain Niriz of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor*," a gruff voice boomed from the speaker. "I'd like a word with you aboard my ship, if I may."

The last word was punctuated by a single gentle shiver running through the deck beneath them as a tractor beam locked on.

“Yeah, I’d say it’s definitely too late to dump the cargo,” Trell sighed. “Let’s hope they’re just on a fishing expedition.”

He keyed for transmission. “This is Haber Trell aboard the *Hopskip*,” he said. “We’d be honored to speak with you, Captain.”

“Well,” Captain Niriz said, his voice echoing across the vast emptiness of the hangar deck as he eyed the four beings standing in front of him. “Most interesting. Our records show the *Hopskip* as having two crew members, not four.” His gaze paused on Riij Winward. “Newly hired, are you?”

“Our previous ship had to leave Tramanos in something of a hurry,” Riij told him, striving to keep his voice casual. The fake ID the Rebellion had provided him was a good one, but if the Imperials decided to dig past it they would undoubtedly come up with his recent connection with the Mos Eisley police on Tatooine. That wasn’t a connection he was anxious for them to find. “We needed a ride to Shibric,” he continued, “and since Captain Trell was going that way, he was kind enough to offer us passage.”

“For a hefty fee, I imagine,” Niriz said, his eyes shifting to the muscular Tunroth standing at Riij’s right. “Rare to see a Tunroth in these parts. You’re a certified Hunter, I presume?”

“*Shturlan*,” Rathe Palror rumbled, his voice almost subsonic.

“That’s a twelfth-class Hunter,” Riij translated, trying to draw Niriz’s attention back to him. Palror’s distinguished service with Churhee’s Riflemen would raise even more eyebrows than Riij’s own record if the Imperials found it.

“Excellent,” Niriz said. “A Hunter’s talents may prove useful on this mission.”

At Riij’s left, Trell cleared his throat. “Mission?” he asked carefully.

“Yes.” Niriz gestured, and a lieutenant standing beside him stepped forward and offered Trell a datapad. “I want you to take a cargo to Corellia for me.”

“Excuse me?” Trell asked carefully as he took the datapad. “*You* want *me* to—?”

“I need a civilian freighter for this job,” Niriz said. His voice was gruff, but Riij could hear a distinct undertone of distaste. “I don’t have one. You do. I also don’t have time to locate someone else to do the job. You’re here. You’re it.”

Riij craned his neck to look over Trell’s shoulder at the datapad, his earlier trepidation about their IDs and cargo giving way to cautious excitement. For a Star Destroyer captain to ask for help of any sort—especially from a scruffy civilian freighter pilot—was practically unheard of. It implied urgency and desperation; and anything that bothered a senior Imperial officer that much was definitely something a good Rebel agent ought to look into. “What do you think?” he prompted.

Trell shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’ll throw our schedule all to blazes and back.”

Riij ran a series of highly vulgar words through his mind, making sure the frustration didn’t show on his face. Trell, unfortunately, was *not* a Rebel agent, good or otherwise, and he clearly wanted nothing to do with any of this. “It wouldn’t take all that long,” he cajoled carefully. “And all good citizens have a duty to help out.”

“No,” Trell said firmly, offering the datapad back to the lieutenant. “I’m sorry, Captain, but we just don’t have time. Our cargo’s due on Shibric—”

“Your cargo consists of six hundred cases of Pashkin sausages,” Niriz interrupted coldly. “I presume you’re aware that the governor has recently decreed that all foodstuff exports now require an Imperial license.”

Trell’s mouth dropped open a couple of millimeters. “That’s impossible,” he said. “I mean, the inspectors didn’t say anything about that.”

“Just how recent was this decree?” Maranne asked suspiciously.

Niriz gave her a thin smile. “Approximately ten minutes ago.”

Riij felt his stomach tighten. Urgency and desperation, indeed. “Off-hand, I’d say we’ve been set up,” he murmured to Trell.

Niriz’s eyes flicked to Riij, returned to Trell. “I am, however, prepared to waive that requirement this one time,” he continued. “Provided you’re prepared in turn to deliver your sausages a little late.”

“As opposed to not delivering them at all?” Trell countered.

Niriz shrugged. “Something like that.”

Trell looked at Maranne, who shrugged. “It’s a two-day round trip to Corellia from here,” she said. “Add in delivery time, and we’re talking three days, tops. It’ll be a scramble, but our schedule can probably absorb that.”

“Not that we have much choice in the matter.” Trell looked back at Niriz. “I guess we’d be delighted to help you out, Captain. What’s the cargo, and when do we leave?”

“The cargo is two hundred small boxes,” Niriz said. “That’s all you need to know about it. As for departure, you’ll leave as soon as your sausages are offloaded and the new cargo put aboard.”

At Riij’s side, Palror rumbled again, and Riij had to fight to keep his own face expressionless. If some bored Imperial took it into his head to poke around beneath the top three layers of sausages in each box ...

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep them cool,” Niriz promised. “There won’t be any spoilage.”

“I’m sure they’ll be safe,” Trell said. “Where does this cargo of your’s go?”

“Your guide will fill you in on those details,” Niriz said, gesturing behind them. Riij turned to look—

And felt the breath catch in his throat. Stepping around the stern of the *Hopskip* toward them, his stained Mandalorian armor glittering in the overhead light—

Trell swore under his breath. “Boba Fett.”

"It's not Fett," Niriz corrected. "Merely, shall we say, an admirer of his."

"A former admirer," the armored figure corrected, his voice dark and muffled. "The name is Jodo Kast. And I'm better than Fett."

"Not that that means much," Niriz said, his lip twisting. "I've always found that a competent stormtrooper could handle any three bounty hunters without working up a sweat."

"Don't push it, Niriz," Kast warned. "Right now you need me more than I need this job."

"I need you less than you might think," Niriz retorted. "Certainly less than *you* need an Imperial pardon for that mess you left on Borkyne—"

"Gentlemen, please," Trell jumped in hastily. "I'm a businessman, with a schedule to keep. Whatever your differences, I'm sure you can lay them aside until this job is finished."

Niriz was still glowering, but he gave a reluctant nod. "You're right, Merchant. Fine. You and your crew can rest in the ready room over there until the cargo's been transferred. As for you—"

He leveled a finger at Kast. "I'd like to see you in the bay control office. There are a few things I want to make sure you understand."

Kast nodded gravely. "Of course. Lead the way."

Niriz stepped into the bay control office, the armored figure striding in right behind him. The door slid closed; and at long last Niriz could let the unnatural stiffness drain out of his posture. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at this, sir," he apologized. "I hope I did all right."

"You did just fine, Captain," the other assured him, reaching up to twist his helmet free and pull it off. "Between this armor and your performance all four of them are completely convinced that I'm Jodo Kast."



"I hope so, sir," Niriz said, his stomach tight with concern as he gazed at those glowing red eyes. "Admiral ... I have to say one last time that I don't think you should do this. At least not personally."

"Your concern is noted," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, running a gauntleted hand through his blue-black hair. "And appreciated, as well. But this is something I can't delegate to anyone else."

Niriz shook his head. "I wish I could say I understood."

"You will," Thrawn promised. "Assuming this plays out as anticipated, you'll have the entire story when I return."

Niriz smiled, thinking about all the campaigns he and the Grand Admiral had been through together out in the Unknown Regions. "When *hasn't* something you planned gone as anticipated?" he asked dryly.

Thrawn smiled faintly in return. "Any number of times, Captain," he said. "Fortunately, I've usually been able to improvise an alternate approach."

"That you have, sir," Niriz sighed. "I still wish you'd reconsider. We could put one of my stormtroopers in the Mandalorian armor, and you could direct him by comlink from somewhere nearby."

Thrawn shook his head. "Too slow and awkward. Besides, Thyne's fortress will certainly have a full-spectrum surveillance set up. They'd pick up any such transmission and either tap in or jam it."

Niriz took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Thrawn smiled again. "Don't worry, Captain, I'll be fine. Don't forget, there's an Imperial garrison nearby. If necessary, I can always call on them for help."

He slid the helmet back over his head and fastened it in place. "I'd better go supervise the cargo transfer—we wouldn't want Merchant Trell's precious sausages to be damaged. I'll see you in a few days."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "Good luck, Admiral."

It was called Treasure Ship Row, and it was billed as the most exotic and eclectic trading bazaar anywhere in the Empire. Dozens of booths and shops of every size and description ran its length, with hundreds more nestled up against its edges, weaving in and out of Coronet City proper. Humans and aliens sat at open-air counters or stood beside doorways, hawking their wares to the thousands of beings jostling their way through the narrow streets.

A vibrant, exciting place; but for Trell, a bit intimidating as well. The merchant part of him was intrigued by the range of merchandise available, as well as by the variety of potential customers an enterprising dealer could sell those goods to. But at the same time the part of him that had driven him into the isolation of space in the first place felt distinctly ill at ease in the middle of such crowds.

Maranne, walking beside him, didn't seem to feel any such discomfort. Neither did the two Rebel agents, striding along behind him. As for Kast, in the lead, he doubted any of them could tell what he was feeling. Or cared, for that matter.

"Where exactly are we going?" Maranne asked, taking an extra long step to get in close behind Kast.

"This way," Kast said, veering through the crowd toward the side.

The others followed, and a moment later all five were standing in the narrow walkway between two shuttered booths. "Here?" Trell demanded.

"The booth you want is five ahead on the left," Kast told them. "Curio shop—owner's named Sajsh. You—" he pointed a gloved finger at Trell "—will tell him you have a cargo for Borbor Crisk and ask for delivery instructions."

"What about the rest of us?" Rijj asked.

"You'll go out first," Kast said. "Stay out of the conversation, but watch and listen."

Trell looked out into the flow of the crowd, a shiver running down his neck. Something about this didn't feel right, but it was

too late to back out now. "Maranne, make sure you're where you can cover me," he told her.

"There will be no shooting," Kast assured him.

"Glad to hear it," Maranne said. "You don't mind if I cover him anyway?"

Kast's invisible eyes seemed to bore into hers through the helmet visor. "As you wish," he said. "All of you: move."

Wordlessly, the others filed out into the crowd, Kast bringing up the rear. Trell gave them a count of fifty to find their positions, then followed.

The curio shop was easy to find: a small, somewhat dilapidated open-air booth with an enclosed back room that had been inexpertly added on long enough ago to look almost as moldering as the booth itself. A lizardine creature of an unfamiliar species was leaning on the counter, watching the crowds passing by. Taking a deep breath, Trell stepped over to him.

The lizard looked up as Trell approached, his alien expression unreadable. "Good day, good sir," he said in adequate Basic. "I am Sajsh, proprietor of this humble establishment. May I be of assistance?"

"I hope so," Trell said. "I have a cargo for someone named Borbor Crisk. I was told you could give me delivery instructions."

A three-forked tongue darted briefly from the scaled mouth. "You have been misinformed," he said. "I know no one by that name."

"Oh?" Trell said, taken aback. "Are you sure?"

The tongue flicked again. "Do you doubt my word?" the alien spat. "Or merely my memory or intelligence?"

"No, no," Trell said hastily. "Not at all. I just ... my source seemed so sure this was the place."

Sajsh opened his mouth wide. "Perhaps he was only slightly incorrect. Perhaps he meant the shop to my kill-hand." He pointed to his right, to an equally dilapidated booth that was

currently closed up. "The proprietor will return at the seven-hour. You can return then and ask him."

"I'll do that," Trell promised. "Thank you."

The lizard snapped his jaws together twice. Nodding, Trell turned and pushed his way back into the stream of pedestrians, face hot with embarrassment and annoyance. "Well?" Maranne demanded, sidling up beside him.

"Kast had the wrong place," Trell growled, glancing around. But the bounty hunter was nowhere to be seen. "Where are the others?"

"We're right here," Rij said, coming up through the crowd behind him. "Kast said to head back down the street and he'd meet us."

"Good," Trell said tartly. "I've got a few things to say to our esteemed bounty hunter. Let's go."

Sajsh and the unknown man finished their conversation, and the latter moved away back into the mass of browsers and shoppers. Two booths over, Corran Horn set down the melon he'd been examining and eased into the flow behind him.

The stranger didn't seem to be trying to lose himself in the crowd. Though any such effort would have been quickly negated by the company he linked up with: a hard-eyed, competent-looking woman, a young man about Corran's own age, and a yellow-skinned alien with several short horns protruding from his chin. For a moment the four of them conversed; then, with the contact man leading the way, they continued on down the street.

At the edge of Corran's vision, a heavysset figure stepped to his side. "Trouble?"

"I don't know, Dad," Corran said. "You see that foursome up there? Tooled brown jacket, blondish woman, white-spiked collar, yellow-skinned alien?"

"Yes," Hal Horn nodded. "The alien's a Tunroth, by the way. Fairly rare outside their home system; most of the ones you run

into these days work with high-stakes safaris, mercenaries, or bounty hunters.”

“Interesting,” Corran said. “Possibly significant, too. Brown Jacket just waltzed up to Sajsh’s booth and tried to make a delivery to Borbor Crisk.”

“Did he, now,” Hal said thoughtfully. “Have Crisk and Zekka Thyne patched up their differences while I wasn’t looking?”

“If they did, I wasn’t looking either,” Corran told him. “Either Brown Jacket and his pals are incredibly stupid, or else something very odd is going on.”

“Either way, I doubt Thyne will simply pass on it,” Hal said. “Did Brown Jacket happen to mention where they could be contacted?”

“No, but Sajsh has that covered,” Corran said. “He said they might want the owner of the booth next to his and suggested they come back about seven.”

“Where they’ll be asked to have a quiet conversation with a group of Black Sun heavies.” Hal stretched his neck to peer over the crowd. “Well, well—the plot thickens. Look who our innocents have hooked up with.”

Corran rose up on tiptoes. There was Brown Jacket and his friends; and with them—

“I’ll be shragged,” he breathed. “Is that Boba Fett?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Hal said. “Possibly Jodo Kast, though I’d have to get a closer look at the armor to be sure.”

“Well, whoever it is, we’ve definitely moved into the big time,” Corran pointed out. “Mandalorian armor doesn’t come cheap.”

“When you can find it at all,” the elder Horn agreed. “This is getting odder by the minute. I take it you’ve had some thoughts already?”

“Only one, really,” Corran said. The group was moving off again, and he and his father set off to follow. “Thyne wouldn’t be stupid enough to kill them out of hand, certainly not until he knows who they are and what their connection is to Crisk. That probably means bringing them to the fortress.”

“And you think you might be able to invite yourself along?”

“I know it’s risky—”

“‘Risky’ isn’t exactly the word I had in mind,” Hal interrupted. “Getting into the fortress is only the first step, you know. You think you’ll be able to simply march up to Thyne, slap the restraints on him in the name of Corellian Security, and march him out?”

“We do have the legal authority to do that, you know,” Corran reminded him.

“Which means nothing at all inside his stronghold,” Hal countered. “You have any idea how many CorSec agents have gone after top Black Sun lieutenants like Thyne and simply vanished?”

Corran grimaced. “I know,” he said. “But that’s not going to happen this time. And if getting into the fortress is only the first step, it still *is* the first step.”

The elder Horn shook his head. “‘Risky’ still doesn’t begin to cover it. For starters, we don’t even know what game Brown Jacket and his Mandalorian friend are playing.”

“Then it’s time we found out,” Corran said. “Let’s stay close and see if we can find an opportunity to introduce ourselves.”

They had gone perhaps two blocks—though where Kast was leading them Trell hadn’t the faintest idea—when they heard the shout.

“What was that?” Riiij demanded, looking around.

“There,” Palror rumbled, pointing his thick central finger to the left. “Argument starting.”

Trell craned his neck. There was an open-air tapcafe that direction, with a long serving bar at the rear and perhaps twenty small tables spread out in the open space in front of it beneath a wide, Karvrish-style woven-leaf canopy. A slightly built man wearing a proprietor’s apron was standing in the middle of the dining area, a half dozen large and rough-looking men wearing

mercenary shoulder patches looming in a threatening circle around him. The chairs from a nearby table were scattered back or lying on the ground, indicating a quick and unruly departure from them. "I think the argument's over," he said. "It's gone straight to trouble now."

"Come on," Rijj said, angling that direction. "Let's check it out."

"Leave it alone," Kast ordered. "It's none of our business."

But Rijj and Palror were already heading off through the crowd. "Blast," Trell growled. Stupid idealistic gornt-brained Rebels—"Come on, Maranne."

A line of onlookers had started to form at the edge of the tapcafe by the time he and Maranne broke through the stream of pedestrians. Rijj and Palror were already to the mercenaries, who had opened their circle around the tapcafe proprietor in order to face this new distraction.

And now Trell could see something he hadn't been able to before. Standing beside the proprietor, clinging tightly to his waist in terror, was a young girl. Probably his daughter; certainly no more than seven years old.

Trell hissed a curse between his teeth. It took a particularly vile form of low-life to threaten a child. But that didn't mean he was going to follow Rijj's lead and charge in blindly like a mad Jedi Knight on Cracian thumper-back. "Backup left," he murmured to Maranne. "I'll take right."

"Right," she murmured back. Dropping his hand casually onto the grip of his blaster, Trell started drifting behind the ring of onlookers to the right—

And with a suddenness that startled him, the fight started.

Not with blasters, which had been his main fear, but with hands and feet as the two closest mercenaries lashed out at Rijj and Palror. With three-to-one odds on their side, the mercs must have felt weapons to be unnecessary.

They got a shock. Rijj had clearly had some good training in unarmed combat, and Palror was a lot faster than Trell would

have guessed from the alien's bulk. Riij's counterattack sent his opponent reeling back; Palror's threw his merc slamming back with a horrendous crash into one of the other tables, sending it spinning and scattering its chairs across the floor.

Someone swore viciously. The downed merc scrambled to his feet and rejoined his comrades, their former casual semicircle now reformed into a deadly, no-nonsense combat line facing their attackers. The proprietor had taken advantage of the distraction to hustle his daughter back across to the bar; heaving her up and over to the relative safety behind it, he turned back to watch.

For a long moment the combatants stood motionless facing each other. Trell kept drifting toward his chosen backup position, his eyes on the meres, his hand tightening on his blaster. Would they draw now, in which case Riij and Palror were probably dead? Or would sheer pride dictate they beat such insolent opponents bloody with their bare hands?

The watching crowd was obviously wondering the same thing. Trell could feel their tension, their excitement, their bloodlust ...

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement to his left. The mercs caught it, too, anger-filled eyes shifting that direction—

Their expressions changed, just slightly. Frowning, Trell risked a look of his own.

Jodo Kast had stepped forward out of the ring of onlookers.

For a moment the bounty hunter just stood there, gazing silently at the scene. Then, stepping to one of the tables at the edge of the tapcafe, he pulled out a chair and sat down. Crossing his legs casually beneath the table, he folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head slightly to one side. "Well?" he asked mildly.

And with that one word the decision was made. No mercenary with a speck's worth of professional pride was going to use weapons against outnumbered opponents who hadn't themselves drawn. Not with a bounty hunter like Jodo Kast watching.



Roaring obscure and probably obscene battle cries, the mercs waded in.

At that first exchange Rijj and Palror had had the element of surprise. This time they didn't. They did their best, certainly—and still better than Trell would have expected given the odds—but in the end they really had no chance. Less than ninety seconds after that battle roar, both Rijj and Palror were on the floor, along with two of the mercs. The remaining four, not all of them looking all that steady on their feet, were grouped around them. One of them looked around, jabbed a finger toward the proprietor cowering at the bar. "Them first," he snarled, breathing heavily. "You next."

"No," Kast said.

The merc spun around to face him, almost losing his balance in the process as a damaged knee tried to buckle under him. "No what?" he demanded.

"I said no," Kast told him. His hands were in his lap now, concealed under the table, but his legs were still casually crossed. "You've had your fun; but I need them alive."

"Yeah?" the merc snarled. "What, you got a bounty to collect on them?"

"You've had your fun," Kast repeated, but this time there was frosty metal glittering in his voice. "Leave it and go. Now."

"You think so, huh?" the merc spat. "And who do you think's gonna stop—?"

And abruptly, right in the middle of his sentence, he dropped his hand to his blaster and yanked it from its holster.

It was an old trick, and one that had probably given the merc the desired edge in many a facedown. Unfortunately for him, it was a trick Trell had seen used countless times before; and even before the other's hand had reached his blaster grip Trell was hauling out his own weapon. At the other side of the ring of bystanders he spotted Maranne also drawing—

The merc had good reflexes, all right. In that split second he froze, his weapon not quite cleared of its holster, staring from

beneath thick eyebrows at the four blasters suddenly pointed at him from the circle of people around the tapcafe.

Trell blinked as it suddenly registered. *Four* blasters?

Four. Two people down from Maranne, a bulky middle-aged man also had a blaster trained steadily on the mercs ... and out of the corner of his eye, Trell could see the fourth blaster sticking out from his side of the crowd. Held with equal steadiness.

The merc spat. "So that's how you want to play it, huh?"

"We're not playing," Kast said icily. "As I said: leave it and go. If you don't—"

Trell never saw the warning twitch he was watching for. But Kast obviously did. Even as the merc started to haul his blaster the rest of the way free of its holster there was the brilliant flash of a blaster bolt from the direction of the bounty hunter's table, and a roar of rage from the merc as his holster and the blaster muzzle behind it shattered.

"—I promise you will regret it," Kast finished calmly. "This is your final chance."

The merc looked like he was about two seconds short of a complete berserk rage. But even furious and with a burned gun hand, he was in control enough to know when the odds were stacked too high against him. "I'll be watching for you, bounty hunter," he breathed, straightening up from his combat crouch. "We'll finish this some other time."

Kast bowed his head slightly. "Whenever you're tired of life, mercenary."

The merc gave a hand signal. The others helped their two casualties to their feet—one groggily starting to come to, the other still in need of basic portage—and the group straggled their way through the onlookers and out into the crowd.

Kast waited until they were out of sight. Then, pushing back his chair, he stood up, the blaster he'd used on the mere's weapon already secreted back in whatever hidden holster it had been drawn from. "The show's over," he announced, looking around at the bystanders. "Stay and buy a drink, or get moving."

The proprietor was already beside Riiij and Palror, helping the former to a sitting position, when Trell and Maranne reached them. “You all right?” Maranne asked, offering Palror a hand.

The Tunroth waved it away. “I am not hurt,” he said, rolling to his feet and flexing an elbow experimentally. “I was merely temporarily disabled.”

“You’re lucky the condition wasn’t permanent,” Trell reminded him. “You should have left it alone like Kast told you to.”

“Yeah,” Riiij said, holding his stomach as he got to his feet with the proprietor’s assistance. “Thanks, Kast. Though I wouldn’t have minded if you’d stepped in a little earlier. Say, before they started pounding on us?”

“Six mercenaries wouldn’t have backed down in front of three blasters,” Kast told him. “I needed you to take some of them out first.”

He half turned. “If I’d known it would be five blasters instead of three, I might have moved sooner.”

Trell turned to look. The two men who’d drawn with them were standing there watching. “Thanks,” he said. “I wouldn’t have counted on getting that kind of help in a place like this.”

“No problem,” the older man shrugged. “The Brommstaad Mercenaries have always had a tendency to consider themselves above the bounds of normal civilized behavior. And I’ve never liked it when children get threatened.”

“Besides which,” the younger man added, “we were starting to get thirsty anyway.”

“Drinks?” the proprietor asked eagerly. “Of course; drinks for all of you. And meals, too, if you are hungry—the finest I have to offer.”

“We’ll take the long table in the back,” Kast said. “And some privacy.”

“Yes, good sir, immediately,” the proprietor said. Giving them a quick bow, he scurried off toward the table Kast had indicated.

"My name's Hal, by the way," the older man said. "This is my partner Corran."

Trell exchanged nods with them. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Trell; this is Maranne, Riiij, Palror, and—"

"Call me Kast," Kast cut him off. "Son or nephew?"

Hal blinked. "What?"

"Is Corran your son or nephew?" Kast amplified. "There's a family resemblance about the eyes."

"People have mentioned that before," Corran spoke up. "Actually, it's just coincidence. As far as we know, we're not related."

Kast nodded once, slowly. "Ah."

"The table seems ready," Hal said, pointing in that direction. "Shall we go sit down?"

"Oh, sure," Hal said, taking a sip from his second drink. "Everyone around here has heard of Borbor Crisk. Fairly small-time criminal, though, as criminals go—strictly local to the Corellian system. Of course, if you're looking for impressive intersystem criminals, we've got some of those, too."

"We're not interested in impressiveness," Trell pointed out. "Criminal or otherwise. We've got a cargo to deliver to this Crisk character, and then we're out of here."

"Yes, you mentioned that," Corran agreed, eyeing the other and trying to read him. It was hard to believe these people were really the simple errand boys they appeared, especially after the incident with the mercenaries. But if this was some kind of deeply clever plan, he was blamed if he could figure it out.

At least, not from the outside. It was about time he made his pitch to get a little closer to the middle. "The thing is this," he went on, looking around the table. "Two things, actually. Number one: considering who Crisk is, your cargo is probably illegal and certainly valuable. That means that you not only have to worry about Corellian Security coming down on you, but also

other criminals who might try to take it off your hands. And number two—” he hesitated, just slightly “—the reason Hal and I came to Corellia in the first place was hoping to find jobs with Crisk’s organization.”

“You’re kidding,” Riij said. “Doing what?”

“Anything, really,” Hal said. “Our last job went really sour, and we need to recoup our losses.”

“That’s why we were following you, see,” Corran said, trying for the proper balance of assertiveness and embarrassment. “I overheard Trell talking about Crisk, and thought—well—”

“We thought maybe we could go with you when you went back to see him tonight,” Hal took the plunge.

Trell and Maranne exchanged glances. “Well—”

“We don’t actually *know* we’re seeing him tonight,” Riij pointed out. “That other booth owner may not know anything more about Crisk than Sajsh did.”

“That’s a good point,” Trell agreed, throwing an odd look at Kast. “This could be nothing but a blind alley.”

“Well, in that case, you’ll need help finding him,” Hal said with a wonderfully genuine-sounding eagerness. “Corran and I are locals—we have all sorts of contacts around the area. We can help you find him.”

“One of you can go,” Kast said.

Corran looked at the bounty hunter, blinking in mild surprise. It was the first time he’d spoken since they’d sat down at the table. “Ah—good,” he said. “Just one of us?”

“Just him,” Kast said, nodding toward Hal. “Trell and the Tunroth will go with him. I’ll be behind as rearguard.”

“What about Riij and me?” Maranne asked.

“You two and Corran will go back to the ship,” Kast told her. “You’ll transfer the cargo onto the ship’s landspeeder so it’ll be ready for delivery.”

Trell and Maranne eyed each other again, and Corran could see neither was particularly happy with the arrangement. It was equally clear, though, that neither was all that eager to argue the

point with the bounty hunter. "All right," Trell said with a grimace. "Fine. What happens if no one at that other booth knows where Crisk is either?"

"That won't be a problem," Kast said. "Trust me."

"Interesting person, Jodo Kast," Hal commented as the three of them headed back toward Sajsh's booth. "Have you worked with him long?"

"This is the first time," Trell told him, looking around uneasily. There were far fewer shoppers at this hour than there had been earlier, and despite his innate dislike of crowds he found himself feeling unpleasantly exposed right now. "Actually, we're not working with him so much as we are working for him. Palror, can you see where he's gotten to?"

"No, don't turn around," Hal said quickly. "We might be under observation, and we don't want to tip them off that we've got a rearguard."

Trell threw him a sideways look. There was something in his voice right then that emphatically did not belong in a down-luck drifter. A tone of authority, spoken by a person who was used to having his orders obeyed ...

Palror rumbled. "Trouble," he said.

Trell craned his neck. He could see Sajsh's booth ahead now, closed up for the night.

The booth beside it, the booth they were headed for, was also closed.

"Great," he growled, stopping. "Still no one there."

"No, don't stop," a soft voice came from behind him.

Trell felt his heart seize up. "What?"

"You heard the man," a different voice said, this one coming from behind Hal. "Keep walking."

With an effort, Trell got his feet moving again. "Are you with Borbor Crisk?"

There was a snort. “Hardly,” the first voice said with obvious contempt. “Keep it casual, and don’t try to be clever. We’d prefer to deliver you in fully working condition.”

Trell swallowed hard. “Where are we going?”

“For now, behind Sajsh’s booth,” the other said. “After that... you’ll see.”

“I’m sure,” Trell murmured, heart pounding in his ears. Still, there was one thing the kidnappers didn’t know. Jodo Kast, one of the finest bounty hunters in the galaxy, was somewhere behind them. Any minute now he would jump out from wherever he was hiding, blasters blazing with micron accuracy, and flip the tables completely on them. Any minute now, and they’d hear the roar of blasters. Any minute now ...

He was still waiting for that minute as the kidnappers herded the three of them aboard a speeder truck, sealed the doors, and drove off into the gathering dusk.

## **Side Trip Part Two**

### **by Michael A. Stackpole**

Corran Horn's feeling that something was wrong got a big boost from his first glimpse of the *Hopskip*. The freighter looked as if someone had taken a stock Corellian YT-1300, split the disk along a line running from bow to stern, flopped one half on top of the other, then patched it together with whatever scrap metal was conveniently at hand. Corran had seen uglier ships, but none that were supposed to be operational.

He waited for Riij to close the gateway to the hangar bay before he made a comment. "I guess smuggling doesn't pay what it once used to?"

Maranne's hard eyes flashed angrily. "We're traders, not smugglers."

Corran raised his hands. "Call it what you want. With Imp rules and regs out there, what starts as a trading trip could end up as a smuggling run."

Surprise played through Maranne's dark blue eyes, then she turned away and scratched at the back of her neck. "I'll get the landspeeder." Her surprise at his comment made her statement



come a bit too fast, and Corran thought perhaps he caught a hint of fear in her words.

*Definitely more here than meets the eye.* The second he saw the ship, Corran abandoned any suspicion that these people were hard-edged smugglers coming to deliver supplies to Borbor Crisk. The things Crisk needed to wage his little war with Zekka Thyne and Black Sun for supremacy in the Corellian underworld weren't the sorts of things that would be entrusted to the crew of the *Hopskip*. *Actually, for Crisk to depose Thyne would require a Star Destroyer, which this ship isn't, and a legion of stormtroopers, which isn't hidden here.*

Corran saw Maranne disappear through a hatch in the freighter, so he turned his attention to Rijj. "Shipping with her can't be too rough. She's pretty easy on the eyes. Known her long?"

The slender man shook his head, then ran a hand across his short, spiky white hair. "Just along for the ride. If I do some work, I get some pay by the time we reach our destination." Rijj smiled carefully. "You been working with your partner long?"

"Off and on." Corran shrugged. Rijj's quick questioning of Corran about his background played to most people's tendency to want to talk about themselves. *It's a technique you learn to exploit when fishing for information from suspects. Either Rijj has had training, is very private, or both.* "Known him for a long time, but started running together recently. Bonded through bad times, you know? Like you and the Tunroth."

"You recognize him as a Tunroth?"

"Hal and me, we might be locals, but that doesn't mean we've not been around." Corran took a step back as Maranne lowered the rear loading ramp on the *Hopskip*. "He got a life debt toward you or something?"

"Life debt is a Wookiee thing." Rijj frowned, then started up the ramp to the freighter's hold. "Rathe and I are just traveling on the same ship. No connection beyond that."

“Got it.” Corran kept an easy smile on his face while cataloguing the information Riij had just supplied him. Corran knew life debts were a matter of Wookiee honor, but he only knew of them because of the Imperial warrants and advisories about Han Solo and the Wookiee working with him. *Most folks don't know Wookiees exist or, at best, know Imps use them for slave labor. Folks who know more about Wookiees are usually Rebel sympathizers.*

He followed Riij up the ramp and started looking around for clues to what the *Hopskip's* crew was doing in Coronet City. As a member of the Corellian Security Force, Corran had access to most information about the Rebellion and its connections to Corellia. *At least I have it when that worthless Imp Intelligence liaison officer isn't around.* While it was true that two of the Alliance's heroes were from Corellia, the Emperor's tightening of his grip on Corellia and the placement of forces on the world had kept the Rebel presence down. Corran knew there were Rebel cells in residence, and he'd gladly have run any of them in, but he didn't see them being so bold or so desperate as to try to hook up with Crisk.

Corran slid past the battered nose of the old landspeeder—like the ship, it looked as if it had been cobbled together from parts. It only had two seats, like a fancy speeder, but had a flat bed grafted on to the back. Except where dents let silvery metal show through, an even, dirt-brown coat of primer covered the vehicle. *Not fast, not strong, but beats hauling this stuff on my back.*

The bank of boxes that Maranne and Riij were freeing from cargo-net tie-downs immediately attracted his attention. They were uniform in size and non-descript, but that struck Corran as odd. All of them had exteriors formed out of green duraplast that was a couple shades darker than his eyes, yet none of the rectangular boxes bore the streaking and scarring common on duraplast boxes. None had holographic tags, scuff marks or other signs of use, yet all had been bound with duraplast cables and fixed with a holographic seal.

As he lifted the first one from the top of the pile he felt nothing shift inside the boxes, nor was there a need for him to locate the box's balance point. He shook his head. "Where did you guys get *sleight* boxes?"

Maranne and Riij both stopped as Corran set his box down on the landspeeder's bed. The woman frowned. "What's a *sleight* box?"

"If you don't know what a *sleight* box is, maybe you aren't smugglers." Corran tapped a finger on the top of his box. "It looks ordinary, but it has a low-power repulsorlift coil matrix and power-supply built into the casing. It neutralizes the weight of whatever is inside. These boxes could be full of thermal detonators or air, and we'd never know. Smugglers developed them to trick customs officials, but most customs-droids know what to scan for now."

Maranne set her box down next to his. "Interesting story. Seems you've done more smuggling than we have."

"Maybe, or maybe I just know more about smuggling than you do." Corran gave her a sly smile. "For example, I know no one smuggles a cargo that's made up of unknown items. What's in these things?"

The woman shook her head, her dark blond queue lashing her from shoulder to shoulder. "Don't know. Don't want to know."

"I find that hard to believe." Corran frowned at her. "I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but these *sleight* boxes won't fool CorSec's droids. If this is stuff being hauled for the Rebels, they'll find it and you'll be in serious trouble."

Riij slid his box onto the flat bed. "If we were Rebels and we knew what was in these boxes *and* it was meant for the Rebels, we'd be a lot more worried about the Empire than we would their puppets here on Corellia."

"You think CorSec's people are Imperial puppets?" Corran flicked that suggestion away with a wave of his hand. "CorSec's concerned with the integrity of the Corellian system, nothing

more. If they tolerate Rebels here, the Imperial presence increases. Who wants that?"

Rijj's brown eyes flashed dangerously. "What you're telling me is that CorSec's people are willing to repress the enemies of a vicious regime so they don't get Vader's boot across their own necks. If I was a Rebel, I'd find it very difficult to tell the difference between CorSec agents and the Imps."

Corran forced himself to go over and pick up another box so he wouldn't immediately snap back at Rijj. The smuggler's arguments had been heard often—and loudly—on Corellia. Corran, whose father and grandfather had both preceded him into CorSec, had long believed that CorSec could do the most good by keeping the Imps out of its solar system security problems. If Corellia could take care of itself and set itself up as a neutral party in this civil war, the citizens of Corellia would benefit.

While that position made perfect sense, and was defensible, it was also a position made at the top of a very slick slope. CorSec's directors had already forced the local divisions to accept Imperial Intelligence Liaison officers to monitor and coordinate operations with Imperial Garrisons. Kirtan Loor, the liaison officer his division had been saddled with, had proved thoroughly arrogant and barely functional. He and Corran did not get along at all.

Corran hefted another box. "I think, from CorSec's view, they have a hard time telling the Rebels apart from honest criminals like me. I don't, but that's because I've got the right perspective. The Rebs aren't honest criminals at all."

Maranne smiled. "'Honest' criminals?"

"Yeah honest. I know that what I'm doing violates the law, but I do it because that's what I do. I take the risks, I make some money, or I get sent to Kessel. It's all very straightforward." Corran placed his box on top of the first one he'd set down. "The Rebels, they do everything I would do, but they say they are entitled to do it because the law is wrong and the Empire is

wrong. They're really just making excuses for their actions so they can feel they're noble when they're really no better than I am."

"What an interesting perspective."

Corran spun at the sound of the faintly echoed voice. Jodo Kast stood in the cargo hatchway, blocking most of the view of the docking bay. Corran ducked and dodged his head to try and see past the bounty hunter, but with no success. "Where's Hal?"

"I would expect, right now, he is very nearly at Zekka Thyne's fortress."

"What?" Rijj's shout of surprise filled the cargo hold. "You were there to protect them. What happened?"

Kast stepped into the cargo hold, then leaned rather casually against the bay's internal bulkhead. "Thyne's people were waiting for Trel and the other two. There were seven of them—including the Broomstaad Mercenaries. I waited until they'd headed off east, then I returned here."

Corran slammed a fist down on top of a *sleight* box. "East is where Thyne has his little palace."

Kast nodded. "Hence my assumption about their destination."

"And you did nothing to stop them?" Corran jabbed a finger in Kast's direction. "You're some hot bounty hunter in this Mandalorian armor who can shoot the blaster from a man's hand while sitting down, and you didn't stop them?"

"There were seven of them and only one of me. I already did the math for you on that match-up—I might have gotten them, but they would have killed your people."

Rijj shook his head. "Rathe could have taken his share of them."

Maranne nodded. "Trel would have been good for at least one."

"And Hal could have popped a couple ..."

"A couple wouldn't have done it."

"... Or more, *if* he'd been given a chance." Corran looked from Rijj and Maranne to the bounty hunter. "Are all three of

you so naive you don't know what's going to happen to our people? Thyne's going to ask them about their connection to Crisk and, if they know as little as you do, he's going to have to work real hard to get answers he trusts. I'm not too wild about him going at Hal like that."

Kast shrugged his shoulders. "You can always find yourself another partner."

"If you think I'm going to abandon Hal, I'm going to have to shuck you out of that armor and beat some sense into you."

Kast's head came up as he moved away from the wall, silently emphasizing just how much bigger than Corran he truly was. "Hardly the reaction I'd expect from two criminal associates. Out of proportion, really. You're acting as if there is a closer bond between you."

Corran gave Kast as cold a glare as he could. He did resemble his father a bit, around the eyes and through the face, but otherwise he was a compromise between his mother and father. She'd been tiny and had the bluest eyes Corran could ever remember having seen. His green eyes were a midpoint between her eyes and his father's hazel eyes, as his brown hair was a match between her blond and his father's once black hair. Even his height formed a bridge between that of his mother and father.

"It wouldn't matter if Hal was my clone—he's my *partner*, which means I'm responsible for him." Corran jabbed a thumb back against his breastbone. "I actually understand what that sort of responsibility means, Kast, and what it means is that I'm not going to leave Hal to Thyne's untender mercies."

Kast folded his arms across his armored chest. "You'd dare take on a Black Sun crime lord?"

Maranne paled. "Thyne is Black Sun?"

"Claw-picked by Prince Xizor, if the rumors are true." Corran leaned on one of the green boxes. "He's crazy-cruel and wholly nasty, but he does operate with a profit motive in mind. This cargo may have been for Crisk, but we could offer it to Thyne and ransom our people."

"I don't think so." Kast produced a datacard from a pouch on his belt and flipped it over to Maranne. "That card has the location and time for a new meeting with Crisk. Deliver the cargo there, then come back here and prepare to take off."

Maranne caught the card. "We're not going anywhere if Haber isn't here."

"I know." Kast gave her a quick nod. "It's my intention to head out to Thyne's fortress and secure the release of your friends."

Corran barked out a sharp laugh. "You balk at taking on seven guttersharks, but you'll free our friends from Thyne's fortress all by yourself? Better check that math, Kast."

"The odds are substantial, but I anticipate success."

"Yeah, well, this is Corellia, and Corellians have no use for odds. I think I'd trust in your success if I was along to enhance it."

"I work alone."

"Hal" Corran jerked his head toward Rijj and Maranne. "You work with them, you can work with me." Corran shook his fists out. "Save us both some trouble and just say yes now."

Kast hesitated and silence stole over the cargo bay. The mercenary studied Corran and even though he could not see Kast's eyes, he could feel the man's hard stare raking him up and down. Corran forced himself to look at the helmet's black slit, inviting a challenge and ready to react to Kast's next move.

The bounty hunter's arms slowly unfolded. "I will go find us a landspeeder."

"Good." Corran realized, as he replied, that he'd been holding his breath. *Hal's going to go crazy when he hears what I did. Facing down a bounty hunter like Kast. It had to be done, but it could have been done better. I'd never run away from a fight with a guy like that, but there's no virtue in picking one, either.*

Darkness swallowed Kast's form, then Corran turned and looked at the other two. "You're in way over your heads, aren't you?"

Riij shrugged. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't like Rathe being captured by a Black Sun crime lord."

"Well, Borbor Crisk isn't much better. We're caught in the arena between two Cyborrean battledogs. Neither of these guys plays well with others, as you've seen."

Maranne brandished the datacard. "What are we going to do? We're supposed to meet with Crisk and give him this stuff."

"The first thing we do is find out what this stuff is." Corran looked at the seals on the boxes already loaded on the landspeeder's bed. "Good, here's one that's junked. See if you can find another."

Riij started looking at new boxes while Corran fished in his pocket for a small hydrospanner. "This ought to do the trick."

Maranne came over and frowned. "What do you mean the box is junked?"

"Not the box, the seal-tab used to bind the duraplast strips." Corran pointed to the round tab that connected the crisscrossing straps. "See how the hologram imbedded in it doesn't fully line up. Look at it from the angle here. The corona on the suns here don't match up."

"I found another one," Riij announced.

"Good, bring it over." Corran hooked the edge of the spanner under the lip of the seal. "When they don't set up right you can pop them apart with a little shove and a twist." He lifted up, then twisted his wrist.

The seal popped apart, freeing the strips that secured the box. "Get both parts and we can reseal this thing once we've peeked at what's inside."

Maranne bent to recover both halves of the seal while Corran attacked the other one. It came apart easily, then he reversed the spanner and used a flat-bladed attachment to pry the box's lid up. "By the Emperor's black heart!"

Even before the lid came up fully Corran caught the sharp sour scent of spice. The box held seven single-kilogram bricks that had been wrapped up in heavy celloplast. They'd been



dipped in a waxy coating to seal them, but the job had been done hastily. One of the packets had split open and spilled a low-grade spice compound inside the box.

“What is that?”

Corran looked at Maranne. “You’re joking, right?”

“Like I said, I’m a trader, not a smuggler.”

“This is spice. It’s a really lousy grade of glitterstim—the real stuff is crystalline, long fine fibers, not a powder like this. Dose up with this and you get really happy, at least really happy until you need more and the craving flows through your veins like plasma. Not a pretty thing.”

Riij curled a lip distastefully. “You know from experience?”

“Just hearsay, and watching a guy try to sell a lung to get more glit.”

“Sell a lung?” Maranne shivered.

Corran shrugged. “Wasn’t his. Belonged to some passerby. Like I said, not good stuff.”

Riij pried the lid off the second *sleight* box. “Sith-spawn!” He reached a hand in and withdrew a crystal spike the thickness of his thumb and a good hand-span in length. Purple filled the stone’s core, running from light at either end to dark in the middle. As Riij held the stone up the light it trapped filled it with orange, yellow and red lightning bolts. All three of them fell silent in response to the brilliant display.

Corran stared at the stone, then shook his head. “Is that a Durindfire gem?”

“I think so.” Riij’s voice-box bounced up and down as he swallowed hard. “My father bought a ring with a Durindfire for my mother on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Wasn’t until the thirtieth that he had the debt paid off, and that was just a *little* stone.”

“Not too many of those stones make it off Tatooine, and very seldom unworked like that finger there.” Maranne took it from Riij and weighed it in her hands. “This would be enough to buy us a new ship.”

Riij turned. "Let's find out what else is in these other boxes."

"No, stop." Corran held his hands up. "We don't have time enough to check them out. Put the stone back, we'll reseal these two boxes and set them in the landspeeder's front seat."

Maranne reluctantly returned the stone to its box. "What do you have in mind?"

"Look, we're going to need some insurance here if we're going to get off Corellia in one piece. We can reseal these boxes and no one will ever know they've been tampered with. You'll take those two boxes to Crisk and let him know you have, what, 198 more for him. He won't make a move against you until he has them."

Riij frowned. "He can come here and take them from us."

"Yeah, but they won't be here. We load the rest onto the speeder and take them to a storage facility." Corran frowned as if thinking hard about something. "Okay, I have it. There's a Dewback Storage Warehouse on the main road back into the center of Coronet City. You can rent a storage shed there and dump the other boxes. You go to your meeting and let Crisk know you'll give him the location of the other boxes when you're certain your friends are safe. Kast and I will go off to see Thyne and if we're not back in due time, you use Crisk to try to effect a rescue."

Maranne slowly shook her head. "I don't like the sound of this."

"Look, we've got a veritable fortune in those boxes. If Crisk doesn't want to help you, set up a meeting with Thyne and ransom us."

"How do we get in touch with Thyne?"

Corran smiled. "You did that back at your first stop on Treasure Ship Row, remember?"

"Right."

"Okay, let's get loading." Corran resealed the first box and then the second. "I know you don't like the way this is going, Maranne, but you're the one who said she's a trader. If things go badly, you're going to have to trade for our freedom and,

speaking for myself, I hope you strike a super bargain in the process.”

Colonel Maximillian Veers glanced down at the chair offered to him, but refrained from sitting. “Thank you for your kindness, Agent Loor, but I do not anticipate being here very long. You have looked at the message I had sent over to you.”

The long, slender man sat forward in his chair, a motion that nearly tossed him sprawling up over the top of his desk. Loor caught himself with his hands, then brushed the lank of dark hair that had fallen over his face back into place. Veers felt certain the man wore his hair the way he did to accentuate his resemblance to the late Grand Moff Tarkin. *I served under Tarkin. Anyone who would think this Loor is at all similar to Tarkin should realize the similarity goes no deeper than the skin.*

“Something wrong with the springs on your chair, Agent Loor?”

The liaison officer snarled. “I have saboteurs who delight in finding ways to annoy me, and adjusting the chair is their latest form of expression.”

He reached over and hit a button on his desktop datapad. “And yes, Colonel Veers, I studied the message you sent over, as requested. I can’t comment on its accuracy beyond saying it is true that Zekka Thyne maintains a little fortress east of Coronet City.”

“I already know that, Loor.”

Loor’s head came up. “You do? I wasn’t aware that Thyne’s headquarters would have been something you studied, Colonel Veers. I was unaware the Imperial Armed Forces had been given cause to consider Black Sun facilities potential targets.”

Veers’ nostrils flared. The only thing he hated more than having to deal with arrogant intelligence agents was turning a blind eye to the activities of the Black Sun. He assumed the Emperor’s tolerance for the criminal cartel was based on reason,

but Veers thought that tolerance was truly a detriment to the Empire. Allowing *any* outlaws undermined the rule of authority. If people could see Black Sun as somehow more malevolent than the Rebellion, then they could justify joining the Rebellion all that more easily.

"It is incumbent upon me, Agent Loor, to view any stronghold that is filled with armed individuals as a potential target. In this case I am told that Thyne is meeting with elements of the Rebel underground."

"Yes, but I am uncomfortable with your source. Who is it?"

"You saw the verification code. It is valid." Veers frowned heavily. "There is no reason to distrust the information. It is accurate and I plan to act on it."

"So you mean you don't know who your source is?"

"I don't need to know."

With a superior smile slithering over his face, Loor eased himself back in his chair. Veers hoped it would overbalance and spill him to the floor. "If you believe in this intelligence source, why come to me?"

Veers restrained himself from reaching out and slapping Loor. "I came to you, Agent Loor, because you are the Imperial Liaison Officer and you liaise with the Corellian Security Force in this administrative sector. I want to know if they have any operatives working in or around Thyne."

"Are you looking to use their extraction as a pretense for your attack, or were you worried I would lodge a protest over collateral damage?"

Veers narrowed his eyes. "There is no reason for good people to die."

Loor shrugged lazily. "If they do die, they die heroes. If you get me Zekka Thyne, you can be a hero, too."

"I believe, Agent Loor, I can find my own way to be a hero." Veers spun on his heel and stalked from the office. *With Imperials like you, Loor, I often wonder why the Rebellion has not yet succeeded in*

*overthrowing the Empire. If things are left in the hands of people like you, can the Empire possibly survive?*

Corran took one look at the SoroSuub X-34 Landspeeder Kast was piloting and sighed. “Buy or borrow?”

The bounty hunter looked up at him from behind the wheel. “Does it matter?”

“If I’m going to get arrested for traveling in a stolen landspeeder I’d kind of been hoping it would be something newer and sportier, like an XP-38.”

“You can always walk, Corran.”

“Good point.” With his left hand on the windscreen, Corran hopped up and into the passenger seat. “Punch it.”

Kast spun the landspeeder’s wheel, fed power to the repulsorlift coils and eased the throttle forward. “How did the loading go?”

“Loading? It went fine.” Corran shifted around in the cramped seat. “They should be ready to make their rendezvous.”

“Good.”

Corran heard the correct emphasis and inflection given to the word, but somehow he thought Kast was being something less than genuine in his response. Corran tried to put his finger on it but couldn’t, and that bothered him. In the past he’d had an almost sixth sense about hardcases like Kast, but he didn’t seem to be able to read the armored mercenary. *The fact that my father has been captured by a man who will fillet him is destroying my concentration.*

Kast piloted the landspeeder in toward the center of town. The bright lights and raucous sounds of Coronet City and Treasure Ship Row all started to press in on Corran. As a member of CorSec he saw Dirtdock—CorSec slang for Treasure Ship Row—as a dangerous place. While the fringes might not be that bad—and plenty of respectful folks dabbled in minor transgressions at some of the flashier places—there were

locations there where even Darth Vader would fear to tread. Most of those establishments were controlled by Black Sun.

Corran's grandfather had lamented the changes in the criminal class since the rise of the Empire. Rostek Horn had been in CorSec back in the days of Moff Fliry Vorrur, back when flouting the law had been an art. In those days, Corran had been told, criminals only made war on criminals. The abduction of Hal and Trell never would have been tolerated back then—civilians would have to get involved with criminal activities a lot more deeply before they were considered fair game.

Then Prince Xizor and his Black Sun organization had come to the fore. Xizor had betrayed Vorrur to the Emperor, in one step eliminating Vorrur and gaining favor with the Emperor. Xizor had used Corellia as training ground for some of his lieutenants. The most recent and most brutal of them was Zekka Thyne.

Corran glanced out of the landspeeder as the Dewback storage facility flashed past. As he turned to look back in the direction they were traveling, he caught Kast watching him. "Something the matter?"

"You seemed to find something interesting out there."

"Yeah, I did." *Think, Corran, think of something good.* "It was the street art on the walls."

"Art? You think the defacement of buildings is art?"

Corran shrugged. "It's not the work of Venthan Chassu but it beats peeling Star Destroyer-white for holding my interest."

Kast studied Corran for a second or two. "How does someone like you know the work of Venthan Chassu?"

"I could lie to you and tell you that my mother used to take me to museums, but you'd see through that." Corran forced himself to stare straight forward as he abandoned the truth and started fashioning a lie from a wild tale a thief he'd once collared had started spinning for him. "I knew a guy who said he had a client who would buy anything in the fine arts from Corellia. He said he'd already lifted and sold a handful of paintings, some

sculpture and a couple of holographic dioramas. The client seemed impressed, but wanted more. He was spending credits like they were made of free-floating hydrogen atoms, so this guy said he wanted to plan a heist to hit the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art. He wanted me in on the crew, so I cased the place.”

Kast nodded slowly. “Who was the client?”

“Don’t know. My man talked to a broker, then he got tractored by CorSec and caught a shuttle to Akrit’ar. He died there.”

“So what did you think of Chassu’s work?”

Corran frowned. *Why would a bounty hunter care about art and care what I thought about art?* “It was interesting. The Selonian nude studies were what I liked the best—but not because they were nudes. Selonians have fur, so can they ever really be nude? And if it were nude Selonians I wanted,” Corran held his hands up above the windscreen, “I could find plenty of them here in Treasure Ship Row.”

“Why did you like them?”

“Chassu caught the two essential elements of Selonians: their sensual, sinewy forms and, because their faces were always obscured, their desire for privacy.” Corran shrugged. “Some of his other work was fine.”

“What did you think of *Palpatine Triumphant*?”

“The throne being built of bones gave me nightmares.” Corran shivered, knowing the nightmares had not come from the skulls and shattered bones, but the homicidally gleeful expression of joy on the Emperor’s face. “As a final masterpiece it does the job, but I would have liked to see him return to Selonian studies.”

“His loss was a pity.” Kast’s helmet turned toward him. “There would appear to be more to you than meets the eye.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed. The last time Chassu’s Selonian nudes were on display at the Fine Arts museum was ten years ago.”

Corran covered his surprise with a smile. "Not exactly. New Year's Day, two years ago, they were displayed for a private reception for Museum patrons. Four hours, ten thousand credits per person." Corran tapped Kast on the shoulder of his armor. "You would have loved it, but you'd have had to get a new paint job on the armor first."

"And you were there."

"I was." *So was Hal. My mother had volunteered with the museum for so long that when it came to hiring additional security for the reception, the administration brought us on board.* "I'll let you know when they throw another of those get-togethers, if you want."

"Please. I'll have to see if I can obtain an invitation to it."

Corran laughed. "If you can do *that*, perhaps you *can* get us an invitation to visit Zekka Thyne. How are you planning to get us in there?"

Kast's voice echoed from within his helmet. "I thought I would appeal to Thyne's sense of justice."

"You'd have an easier time finding the *Katana* fleet." Corran shook his head. "Zekka Thyne is a human-alien mongrel with big blue blotches all over his pink-white flesh. His eyes are blood red except for black diamond pupils that are outlined in gold. He's got sharp ears, sharper teeth and the sharpest sense of retribution you've ever run into this side of a Wookiee bearing a grudge. I heard he shot a spice courier because the courier told Thyne she'd borrowed credits from a payoff, but had already repaid the momentary loan, with interest."

"What would Thyne have done had the woman not told him?"

"Killed her more slowly. He's a real artist with a vibroblade." Corran frowned heavily. "What Patches lacks in brains he makes up for in feral viciousness. What would you charge to kill him?"

Kast's head came up just a centimeter or two. "Are you asking me to murder him?"

Corran hesitated for a second. "No, I guess I'm not. I was just wondering. I thought maybe if I did it I could consider the



amount you'd get paid as some sort of charitable deduction on my taxes. If I paid any, that is."

"I would not be averse to seeing Thyne eliminated, but that is outside the purview of my immediate task." Kast looked over at him. "I believe, however, I can get us in to see him. I think the diplomatic approach would be best."

"I agree. I prefer diplomacy." Corran tapped the blaster holstered beneath his left armpit. "I'm also ready in case we have to be undiplomatic."

"Which means?"

"Which means I go low, you go high."

Kast nodded solemnly. "That shall be our backup plan, then."

The bounty hunter piloted the landspeeder with ease through the darkened hills outside Coronet City. Thyne's estate had once belonged to a shipping magnate who was arrested and sent to Kessel for smuggling spice. Thyne had obtained the deed at auction, after which rumors started through the Corellian underworld suggesting Thyne had provided the evidence that got the magnate convicted. Corran always suspected that bit of subterfuge had actually been planned and executed by Prince Xizor, since Thyne had not since shown himself to be that clever.

As they crested the last hill and came down into the broad valley in which the estate had been built, Corran pointed at the main building. "It doesn't look like much, but those rolling hills serve as great revetments and channel an assault force in toward areas where he has mines in place. Up in the towers he's supposed to have E-webs capable of sweeping any soldiers off the grounds. Thyne is even supposed to have a bolthole ready to let him get safely away if trouble starts, which isn't likely. Double-thick walls, double-paned transparisteel windows, complete electronic sensing systems and forty to fifty blaster-boys make this a pretty tough nut to crack. I've heard CorSec has an open warrant to search the place, but without the Imp garrison to back them up, no one is stupid enough to try to deliver it."

“You weren’t joking about the sensors.” Kast directed the landspeeder toward two men coming out of a side entrance, catching them in the glow of the ridelamps, then turned the speeder to the left and let it settle to the ground. “I’ll go speak with them. You be ready in case things go badly.”

“You’ll give me a sign?” Corran watched the bounty hunter unfold himself from the driver seat and mentally catalogued the weapons he could see. “Dumb question. If they fall I’ll come running.”

He watched Kast approach the two men. The bounty hunter held his hands open and out away from his sides, but not up in any sign that could be taken as surrender. *He wants them to know he doesn’t intend to kill them, but that he’s capable of doing just that given sufficient provocation.* The trio met and Corran could hear the buzz of voices, but could make out no words. One of Thyne’s men spoke into a comlink, then Kast raised his left hand and beckoned Corran forward with a casual flutter of fingers.

Corran left the landspeeder and approached the three men, aping Kast’s open-handed posture while doing so. One of Thyne’s men came toward him, clearly intent on taking his blaster, but Corran frowned at him. *What, you think I’m stupid enough to try to shoot my way in and out of here?*

The blaster-boy hesitated, then sunk his hands into his pockets.

The other Black Sun hireling pointed at Corran. “Go ahead, take his blaster.”

“You think he’s stupid enough to try to shoot his way in and out of here?” The first gunman shook his head. “Let’s take them to the boss. We don’t want to keep him waiting.”

“True. Follow us.”

Their guides conducted them to the main entrance and into a foyer that Corran thought might have once rivaled that of the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art for splendor. Rose granite and black marble had been inset into the floor in a complex and chaotic pattern. A stone staircase spiraled up to the second and

third floors, and drew the eyes upward to the holographic representation of the night sky above them. Small alcoves in the walls housed statuary and huge goldenrod wall panels provided ample space for the display of a vast array of paintings and original holographic works of art.

*It's amazing how something that could have been so beautiful can so easily be made so ... vulgar.* It seemed as if Thyne's definition of art was intimately wrapped up with the concepts of nudity, excess and a color scheme that relied heavily on pinks, purples and an irritatingly vibrant shade of green. Some of the statuary—what little of it actually could have found a home in the Museum of Fine Arts—had been garishly *corrected* by application of this color scheme, with excess paint having spilled down the walls. The paintings showed Corran a view of models he thought more appropriate for xenobiological textbooks and the holographs seemed the visual equivalent of a high-pitched scream.

"How much were you going to offer me to kill him?" Kast whispered.

"Not enough."

They followed their guides through the foyer and a huge set of double doors into Thyne's office. Here the clash of artworks had a new element added to it: a war between style of furnishings. Thyne's desk had been carved from deep brown *mwelin* tree wood and was in itself a work of art. Surrounding it were other pressed-form duraplast and fiberplast chairs and tables—the sort of things that could be left out in a glen because weather would not hurt them. A few stainless steel tables topped with transparisteel sheets completed the decor and a riot of lamps—no two matching—provided illumination for it all.

Corran looked over at Hal and caught a brave nod from him despite the twin lines of blood dripping down from his nose. Haber Trell looked in worse shape, with a rapidly swelling eye and an inert vibroblade stuck into the seat of his chair between his thighs. The Tunroth's yellow flesh had greyed up a bit, and a

dollop of bluish blood trickled from one nostril, but Rathe otherwise looked alert.

Zekka Thyne smiled at Kast and Corran found the expression nothing short of obscene. “Ah, Jodo Kast, finally we meet. Normally I do not retain an individual I have not met, but your reputation precedes you. I decided the credits were well spent.” Thyne’s scarlet gaze sharpened. “Don’t disappoint me.”

“I have no intention of doing so.” With a swift, smooth motion, Kast drew a blaster in his right hand and jammed the muzzle against Corran’s left temple. “Haber Trell and the Tunroth are assassins who were hired by Borbor Crisk to eliminate you. Their partners are even now arranging for Crisk to fill a couple hundred *sleight* boxes with the price for your head.”

“That’s not true!” Haber Trell snarled angrily. “He’s lying.”

Thyne silenced him with a backhanded slap. “So who are these other two?”

Kast grunted what almost seemed to be a laugh. “They hired these two locals to help them get around and as camouflage. With these two in tow, who would think they are galaxy-class assassins?”

Corran started to raise a hand to massage his head, but Kast kept the gun pressed hard against his skull. Corran wasn’t certain which hurt more: his head or his pride at having been fooled by Kast. *He played me very well, just like he played the rest of us. Better I was in my father’s place because Kast never would have fooled him.*

Corran glanced sidelong at Kast, then nodded toward Thyne. “You know, you really can’t trust the word of a bounty hunter.”

“True, but I am more willing to trust him than some assassin’s local fetch-and-carry.”

Kast reached over and relieved Corran of his blaster, then lowered his own gun. “My story is fairly easy to check out. You should dispatch some of your people to the Mynock’s Haven. It is the cantina where Trell’s partners are meeting within the hour with Crisk to finalize the payoff details. You’ll find the *sleight* boxes at the Dewback storage yard near the spaceport. You can

send other of your people there and wait for Crisk and his men to come and fill the boxes.”

Corran rubbed at his temple. “You figured that out from my look at the place? You’re good.”

“That’s why people retain me.” Kast looked over at Thyne. “I take it you have detention cells here?”

“Wine cellar is empty. You can put them in alcoves down there.”

“Good. I shall do that while you prepare the ambush for Crisk.” Kast motioned with his blaster for Corran to head toward the door. “Once your people report back, you’ll know who you can trust.”

“Yes.” Thyne hissed the word. “And those who are lying will pay the ultimate price for daring to deceive me.”

## **Side Trip Part Three**

### **by Michael A. Stackpole**

Propelled by a poke in the kidneys with a blaster carbine, Corran Horn stumbled into the makeshift cell. He got control of himself fast enough to avoid bumping into his father and turned back quickly, but Jodo Kast swung the wrought-iron gate shut. That effectively sealed the two Horns in a small, dusty grotto that had once been home to a fine collection of wines from throughout the Empire. *At least that's the impression I get from all the broken bottle bits on the floor.*

Corran skewered Kast with the nastiest stare he could muster. "This isn't over between us, Kast."

The bounty hunter regarded Corran placidly, but the trio of Zekka Thyne's henchmen forcing the other man and the Tunroth into a second grotto across the cellar laughed out loud. Their leader, the beefy, red-haired man who had given Corran the shove, sneered at the undercover Corellian Security Force officer. "You're strictly small time, pal. The boss isn't going to give you a crack at this guy. I'll be the one to take care of you."

“Oh?” Corran gave the man a feral grin. “I didn’t realize Thyne was into doing favors for the hired help. You’re welcome to try me any time.”

“He won’t get the chance.” Kast’s voice came low and cold. “I’ve put up with your prattling and bragging and threats, Corran, and I am not of a mind to let someone else eliminate annoyances from my life.” The armored mercenary pointed a finger at the redheaded man. “Touch him and I will consider it a matter of honor to turn you inside out.”

The redhead paled. “Yes, sir.”

Another of Thyne’s Black Sun underlings closed the other gate and secured it. “They’re in. Wanna threaten any of *them*, Nidder?”

The redhead frowned. “Suck vacuum, Somms. You think you’re so funny, you can think up jokes while you stand guard on these clowns.”

Somms’ blond brows arched down toward his nose. “They’re in here secure, they don’t need guarding.”

Kast shook his head. “No, not in here, of course not, but outside the room, on the first stair landing. There you can hear commotion from in here or the main floor and be able to respond.”

Nidder shoved his blaster carbine into Somms’ hands. “You heard him.”

Corran smiled. “Just what I expected, Kast. You want someone stationed between you and me.”

Kast grabbed the grate’s iron bars and shook it once, hard. The metal rattled loudly and, startled, Corran involuntarily took a step back. Nidder, Somms and the third Black Sunner started laughing, but their mirth didn’t stop Corran from hearing Kast’s reply to his remark.

“I’ve no fear of you, Corran. I look forward to you getting out of here because with Thyne sending his blaster-boys off to ambush Maranne and Rijj, I’m pretty much assured that I’m all that stands between you and your freedom. You may be good—

you may even be better than I give you credit for being—but I’m still better.”

Corran’s left temple throbbed from where Kast had jammed his blaster pistol against it. “Keep thinking that, Kast, and don’t be surprised when I prove you wrong.”

“Come see me, Corran, when your boasts are not idle.” Kast turned and herded the rest of the men from the small room. An old wooden door closed behind him and clicked shut.

Corran stared after him for a moment, then spun on his heel and swore. “Sithspawn! That son of a rancor played me for an idiot.” He looked up at his father. “I’m sorry, Dad. I really made a mess of things.”

The elder Horn’s hazel eyes narrowed. “How do you plot our predicament being your fault?”

“I should have known there was something wrong.” Corran scrubbed his hands over his face. “Their ship, the *Hopskip*, is a piece of trash that Crisk wouldn’t use to haul dead bodies, much less valuable merchandise. The others had no idea what was in their cargo hold and it turned out to be full of *sleight* boxes.”

Hal frowned. “*Sleight* boxes are hardly state of the art for smugglers these days. It’s almost as if they wanted to be caught.”

“Right, exactly.” Corran leaned against a fiberplast wine rack built into the grotto’s wall. “Kast told Thyne the boxes are empty, but I found some with junked holo-seals and popped them. One box had spice—strictly joy-dust grade, but spice nonetheless—and the other had a fortune in uncut Durindfire gems. Even if we figure that one box of gems is it and the other 199 are spice, Crisk can use the gems to buy an army and use the spice to flood the market and kill Black Sun’s profits.”

Hal Horn turned a wooden wine-box over and sat. “So what you’re telling me is that we have non-smugglers bringing in two hundred *sleight* boxes and they have no idea what’s in them. You find gems and spice in two and the shipment is headed for Crisk. Crisk himself can’t put together that sort of shipment, so he has a backer. Who?”



Corran frowned. "The gems come from Tatooine. Isn't there a Hutt out there working the spice trade?"

"Jappa or Jadda or something like that, yes. He's powerful there, but expanding into Corellia? That's too bold a move." Hal's mouth opened, then he shook his head. He motioned his son aside and looked past Corran toward the other cell. "Haber Trell, how long have you known Jodo Kast?"

The *Hopskip's* pilot stood and grasped the bars of his prison. "I don't know him. He's along for the ride."

"Yes." Hal leaned back against the wall and laughed lightly. "That's it."

Corran shook his head. "You're saying Kast is behind the shipment going to Crisk? But that makes no sense since he's told Thyne's people where to find the boxes with the spice and gems."

"No, Corran, Kast isn't the mastermind, *he's* what's being smuggled into Corellia."

Corran's jaw shot open. "It doesn't make any sense."

"No?" Hal gave Corran an appraising glance—of the sort that in the past had warned Corran that his father thought he was being lazy in his thinking. "What do you make of Kast's last remark?"

Corran thought back. "He was taunting me."

"Agreed, but what did he tell us by taunting you?"

The sigh came up all the way from Corran's toes. "He told us that he was all that stood between us and freedom—that Thyne's guys are all gone. He told me to come find him when we got free." Corran slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I should have seen that."

"You did."

"Yeah, but it took you to point it out to me." Corran shook his head and toed the neck of a broken bottle. "There are times when my brain just doesn't work."

"No, Corran, your brain works fine." Hal kept his tone even, but pointed a finger at his son. "You just need to focus your

thinking. You're angry because of how Kast tricked you, and I think you were a bit afraid for how I was doing."

"Right on both counts."

"It's understandable, son, and appreciated in the case of your concern for me, but you can't let your emotions and incidental things deflect you."

"I know that, Dad. I really do." He smiled at his father. "I try to follow your example, but you're better at it than I am."

"I have a few years on you, Corran."

"It's more than just the years, Dad." Corran winced. "I never would have read Kast's message right the way you did."

The elder Horn's eyes twinkled. "I have to admit to you, Corran, I cheated this time out."

"What?"

Hal pointed past him. "Up there, on the bars Kast shook, see what that little thing is, will you?"

Corran turned and looked closely at the bars. Where Kast had grasped one in his right hand, Corran saw a small black cylinder about a hand-span in length and about the diameter of a blaster-bolt. He freed it from the bar with a tug, leaving an adhesive residue on the wrought-iron, and felt a small button beneath his thumb, near the cylinder's tip.

"Be careful with that, Corran."

The younger man nodded and hit the button. All but invisible in the half-light, a delicate monomolecular blade slid from the cylinder. "I know what it is, and I remember what happened to Lefty Dindo." Corran cut carefully down with the blade and through the lock's bolt. He retracted the stiletto's fragile blade and swung the door open. "Freeing us from this cell is a bit easier than Lefty trying to use one of these to free himself from binders."

Hal Horn paused in the door cell's doorway. "You might want to cut us a couple of the bars to use as weapons. Somms might not be the brightest of Black Sunners, but I think he's going to take some convincing before he lets us out of here."

“Agreed.” Extending the blade again, Corran cut a pair of 50-centimeter-long bars from the bottom of the grate and handed one to his father.

Hal swung the club against his left hand with a meaty thwack. “This will work. Now how do we lure Somms in?”

Corran squinted at the room’s closed door. “You figure Somms as someone who will raise an alarm immediately, or will wait to report success?”

“After Nidder’s giving him the duty? He’ll act, then report.”

“That’s my read, too. The landing was ten steps up and we’re far enough away from the office that if we make some noise, no one will notice, I think.” Corran smiled. “I’ll do the hard work if you want to do the yelling.”

“Yelling works for me.” Hal Horn smiled. “Be careful.”

“Right.” Corran walked over to the wooden door and set the length of the blade to a half-centimeter shy of the door’s depth, then cut very cautiously. He scored a circle in the center of it. Once he had the circle taken care of, he cut lines heading out from it as if a child drawing a sunburst. Lastly he carved little semicircles around the hinges and the lock.

He closed the blade and handed it to his father in exchange for one of the clubs. “Okay, here goes nothing.”

“Wait!”

Corran looked over at Haber Trell. “What do you want?”

“Don’t leave us in here. If you’re busting out, we want to go, too.”

“I don’t think so, Trell.” The flesh tightened around Corran’s eyes. “Even if you’re twice the fighter that you are a smuggler, you’ll still be in the way.”

Hal nodded in agreement, but tossed them the molecular stiletto anyway. “Corran’s right, you won’t want to come with us. We’ll head out and deal with Thyne. Give us a couple of minutes, then go fast. Steal one of Thyne’s airspeeders and fly. Head back to your ship and get out of the system.”

Trell nodded. “Thanks.”

Corran frowned at his father, then pointed at Trell. “And, listen, don’t put that cargo back on your ship. You don’t want to be shipping spice around.”

Trell shivered and Corran took that to be an eloquent answer to his caution.

“Ready, Dad?”

“All set.”

Corran smiled and ran backward at the door. He leaped up and hit it smack in the middle with his back. The door exploded into fragments around him, spraying large chunks of wood into the narrow corridor outside the makeshift prison. Corran crashed down amid it all, yelping involuntarily instead of letting forth with a great *oof* as he had planned. *No jagged edges, but the debris sure is lumpy.*

Hal’s voice flooded through the dying echoes of the door’s crisp crack. “Keep that Tunroth away from me!”

With his eyes nearly shut, Corran saw Somms come flying down the stairs to the landing. The man kept his back to the stone wall as he crept toward the cell, then he brandished the blaster carbine and prepared to rush into the cell. To do that he prepared to pivot on his right foot, fill the doorway, then go in.

As Somms’ left foot came around in the pivot move, Corran caught it in his left hand. Letting Somms’ momentum pull him up into a sitting position, Corran brought his metal truncheon down on the top of the man’s pelvis. Somms started to cry out, more in surprise than pain it seemed, when Hal appeared in the doorway and clipped him with a fist in the head.

Somms collapsed to the floor and did not move.

Corran frowned at his father. “Why cut the club if you aren’t going to use it?”

“Didn’t need it.” Hal snaked the blaster carbine from beneath Somms, flicked the selector lever over to stun, and pumped a blue bolt into him. The Black Sunner twitched once, then lay gently still. “I expect he’ll still feel the blow you dealt him when he wakes up.”

“We can but hope.” Corran rolled him over and unfastened his blaster belt. Donning it himself, Corran pulled the blaster from it and checked the power pack. He glanced up at his father. “You going to leave that set on stun?”

“I haven’t noticed that killshots fly any more true than stunbolts.”

“True, but there’s just so many more forms to fill out when we bring them back alive.”

“Don’t even joke about that, Corran.” His father gave him a reproving glance that made Corran feel about as big as a hologame piece. “Set it on stun and you won’t regret accidentally hitting a friend.”

“Yes, sir.” Corran flicked the pistol’s selector lever to stun and stood up. He waved his father toward the door. “Time to get Thyne. Age before beauty.”

“Brains before impudence.” Hal tossed a quick salute to Haber Trelle and Rathe. “Luck to you, but keep your heads down and get out of here fast. If Thyne doesn’t react well to our refusing his hospitality, you don’t want to be in the blast radius.”

Arl Nidder matched Jodo Kast’s long-legged stride as best he could. The bounty hunter impressed him, but the armor impressed him more. *Now if I had a suit of that Mandalorian armor I’d be pretty tough. I’d be able to get a lot of light-years between me and the rest of the Bromstaad boys. Maybe I’d hire out to do wetwork for some Moff, or maybe even Prince Xizor.*

His ruminations ended abruptly as they reentered Thyne’s office. Nidder liked the office because it seemed like a museum to him. He’d never been in a real museum, but he knew they were places where old and valued things were collected. He took it as a mark of pride that Thyne kept him close enough to protect the crime lord’s prized possessions.

Surrounded by beauty though he was, Thyne did not look happy. The holoprojector plate built into his desk showed a view of Thyne’s fortress and the surrounding valley in translucent green detail. Moving around the area were small orange icons

that Nidder had seen in security simulations, but only when they were running worst case scenarios to scare the wits out of new recruits.

Nidder's jaw dropped. "Are those really storm-troopers?"

Thyne nodded, then snapped a comlink on. "All personnel report to battle stations. This is not a drill. We have hostile deployment to the north and east. Move it, I want all defenses reported as operational in thirty seconds."

Nidder and Deif started toward the room's partially ajar doors, but Thyne stopped them with a snarl. "Not you two. Not that I don't trust you, Kast."

Kast raised his hands. "But you don't trust me. I'll remind you of this next time we negotiate a price for my services." The long, tall bounty hunter pulled a chair around where he could watch Thyne on the right and the doors at the left, but did so in such a casual way that it took Nidder a moment or two to recognize exactly what he was doing. Kast looked directly at Nidder, then calmly crossed his right leg over his left.

Nidder shifted uncomfortably and got the distinct impression that the only way he'd get a suit of that armor was to be lucky enough to be around when someone else killed Kast and peeled him out of it. Of course, the thought didn't form itself exactly that way in Nidder's brain. He just knew he didn't want *that* suit of armor, just one like it.

His momentary feeling of inferiority vanished as he realized Kast wasn't as smart as he thought himself to be. If the mercenary had turned his chair around he still could have watched the desk and doors, but also could see the painting of frolicking nudes on the wall. As it was, Nidder could fully appreciate it—though he was at a loss to explain why the artist had included gardening implements in the painting—and smiled to let Kast know what he was missing.

The hologram shifted to a schematic of the house, with the corridor outside the door rendered in yellow light that blinked on and off. Thyne hissed furiously. "Someone is in the hall. The

Imps have already infiltrated the building.” He pointed Nidder and Deif toward the door.

Kast started speaking in a loud voice. “Of course, handling things in a diplomatic manner works best.” The bounty hunter pointed toward two spots along the wall where the Bromstaad mercenaries could cover the doorway with a murderous cross fire. “Then again, there are times when one has to be *undiplomatic*.”

Nidder marveled at how Kast’s voice covered the sound of his approach to the door. He stopped exactly where Kast wanted him to and drew his blaster pistol. He set it to kill and waited, but shot Kast a wink and a nod. When the nod was returned, Nidder even began to imagine that Kast might take him on as an apprentice, or even a partner. *He’s seen how good I am. He knows what he’ll be getting when we work together.*

The exploding of the lower half of one door interrupted Nidder’s fantasy. Through the smoke and spray of fiery debris came the smallest of the prisoners they’d left below. Coming up into a crouch from the somersault that carried him through the hole, the brown-haired man raised a blaster pistol and triggered two shots. The first blue bolt missed, but the second caught Deif in the stomach, wreathing him in azure energy.

Nidder brought his pistol in line with the little man. *He doesn’t see me. He doesn’t know I’m here. His mistake.* Nidder started to tighten his finger on the trigger when he felt himself moving backward. He felt his shoulders hit the wall, then his head rebounded from it. Through the exploding stars he saw a second bolt flash out from the blaster built into the thigh of the Mandalorian armor.

In the nanosecond it took for the scarlet bolt to sizzle through his chest, Nidder realized Kast had positioned him so carefully and precisely because the bounty hunter wanted to kill him. Nidder did not feel outrage at having been so easily betrayed and slaughtered, nor did he, in his dying moment, grant Kast a modicum of respect for having worked so coolly to slay him. No,

for Arl Nidder, dying as he slid to the floor, there was only one final thought. *Now if I had a set of that armor...*

Corran saw the red bolts burn by on his left and swung around in that direction as his target flopped to the ground. At the back of the room, Corran saw Thyne running for where a wall panel slid back to reveal a black recess. He started to track the fleeing crime lord, but pulled his pistol back as Kast's head and shoulders eclipsed Thyne. *He's getting away.*

Corran glanced back at the door. "All clear."

Hal stepped through, looked at Nidder's body, then at Kast. "That's another round of drinks on me by way of thanks."

The bounty hunter uncrossed his legs and stood. "Pest control."

Corran pointed at the dark opening in the wall. "Thyne went out through there."

Hal approached it cautiously. "Looks clear."

Corran appropriated the blaster carbine the man he'd shot had been carrying and set it for stun. "Let's go find him."

He turned to Kast. "Come along. We could use your help. There's a bounty on Thyne. We're going to get him, but the bounty can be yours." Corran looked around the room at the garish decorations and horrific art. "It might even be sufficient to buy some real art and offset memories of this place."

"You tempt me very much." Kast shrugged. "However, someone with such inferior taste in art should not be hard to catch. I would join you, but I'm a simple bounty hunter and I still have a job to do."

Despite having no read on Kast, Corran knew he was lying. He raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe you're a simple bounty hunter."

"Nor do I believe you and your father are simple hoodlums looking for underworld employment." Kast crossed to the desk and punched a button on the holographic display unit's control panel. A view of the surrounding area came up and Corran saw small orange icons moving in swarms over the terrain. "These are



Imperial storm-troopers. They're likely to make things uncomfortable if you don't get going. You don't want to be caught here."

"Neither do you."

"I won't be."

Corran nodded. "Another time, then."

"Perhaps." The finality in Kast's voice told Corran there never would be a next time, and somehow he didn't find that prospect cause for anything but relief.

Corran rejoined his father just inside the entrance to Thyne's escape passage. The narrow corridor had been melted through the native stone with a gentle slope downward. Every fifteen meters or so it cut back on itself, forcing the Horns to advance carefully. The brevity of the passages meant any firefight would be at close quarters and extremely deadly.

Corran clutched his blaster carbine in both hands and snuggled it against his right flank. It had been modified slightly after its arrival from the factory by the inclusion of a pinpoint glow rod attached to the left side of the barrel, and more work had been done on it to make it what was known in street parlance as a *hotsbot*. The trigger guard had been cut away, leaving the trigger free and the weapon liable to be fired when the trigger caught on clothing or was otherwise jarred. Using a *hotsbot* was supposed to indicate how tough a person was, but it only took one view of the results of an unsafed *hotsbot* pistol being tucked into a waistband to convince most folks it was a foolhardy modification.

*Of course, no one is going to tuck a carbine into his pants.* Corran smiled slightly, then nodded as his father signaled him to come forward. Remaining low, Corran came around the corner of the corridor, then dropped to the ground as a red blaster bolt sizzled through the air above him.

He shot back twice, but neither blue bolt hit anything but stone. "Corridor widens out into a natural cave. We're probably at the rear of the property."

“Okay, take it slow. Lose the light.”

Corran flicked off the pinpoint glow rod and closed his eyes. He waited for a count of ten for his eyes to get adjusted to the darkness, then opened them. Bioluminescent lifeforms—lichen and the things that ate it—gave off a purplish glow that allowed Corran to make out shadowed shapes. Some were regular and appeared to be duraplast boxes of varying sizes, while the larger, more menacing ones were curiously hunched and gnarled stone formations. There seemed to be little physical modification of the cave; the floor remained uneven and boxes had been wedged in various places where space allowed. Corran assumed the previous owner had kept the cave in its natural state and Thyne had stored in it precious or vital cargoes that he did not trust to have any place else.

Corran crept forward, remaining low. He reached the first box and in the faint glow made out the stenciled Imperial legend proclaiming it to be full of blaster carbines. He would have opened it, but the scent of spice lingered strongly enough in the immediate area that he knew what it really contained. *Either Thyne is just storing spice in this, or Black Sun has some backdoor Imperial connections that are allowing them to ship this stuff in past Customs. I'll have to ask Loor about that.*

Corran whistled short and sharp, then heard his father close the gap between them. For an older man, and one as big as he was, Hal moved pretty quietly. *I felt his presence before I picked up that slight scuff of his sole against the stone. Oh, Thyne, you don't know who you're messing with.*

A return whistle sent Corran forward. He moved slowly and carefully, wending his way from one dark rock to another. He did his best to avoid those that were glowing because he didn't want to silhouette himself against one. He took great care to make as little noise as possible, and smiled as he hunkered down behind a large black rock.

Corran looked back toward his father and was set to whistle when he heard the scrape of metal on a rock. He glanced up and

triggered one shot from the blaster carbine. The azure bolt streaked past Thyne as he leaped down from a large dolmen, then Thyne's right heel caught Corran in the shoulder and spun him to the ground. His blaster carbine bounced away, firing off two random shots. He felt Thyne's left arm tighten around his neck and then he was hauled to his feet as the alien straightened up, his body shielding Thyne from fire.

The muzzle of a blaster pistol ground in under the right corner of Corran's jaw. A glow rod lit up, bathing the right side of Corran's face with light. The muscles on the arm around his neck bulged, constricting his breathing and killing any thoughts of struggling.

Thyne growled loudly, sending angry echoes of his voice throughout the cavern. "Your partner is dead if you don't show yourself in five seconds."

Those five seconds took an eternity to pass for Corran, and he filled it with an unending series of *if-onlies*. *If only I had tucked the blaster pistol into my waistband when I took the carbine. If only I had the stiletto. If only I'd been more quiet in my advance....* Self-recriminations clogged his mind and fed the despair slowly creeping into his head.

Then his father stood up and the glow rod on his carbine burned to life. Illuminated by its backlight, Hal Horn stood twenty meters away, the carbine held steady in his right hand. He presented Thyne with a profile—offering him a target other than Corran. The expression on his father's face bore a gravity Corran had not seen since his mother's funeral. Hal's eyes seemed purged of anger and fear, but full of intent.

"It is my duty to inform you, Zekka Thyne, that I am inspector Hal Horn of the Corellian Security Force and you are under arrest. I have a valid warrant for your apprehension for violations of smuggling laws. Let your hostage go and stop making things more difficult for yourself."

Thyne's chuckle came low and ringing with contempt. "No, this is the way it's going to go. You're going to remove your finger from the trigger and lower your blaster."

"I can't do that."

"You *will* do that." Thyne tightened his hold on Corran's neck. "My eyesight is good enough even in full darkness here that I can tell if your finger so much as twitches toward pulling the trigger. And my reflexes are good enough that I'll pump three shots through your partner's head before you complete that move. You may get me, but your partner will be dead. Do it, *now!*"

Hal frowned. "Okay, don't do anything rash."

"Don't, Hal! Shoot him...."

Thyne jammed the gun harder into Corran's jaw. "You were stupid enough to join CorSec, let's not be stupid enough to die for it."

Hal's left hand came up. "Okay, I'm doing what you said. I'm pulling my finger off the trigger."

Corran tried to shake his head to tell his father not to comply with Thyne's order. *He has to know that the second he disarms himself Thyne will shoot me and then shoot him. I may already be dead, but no reason for him to die, too.*

Hal Horn's right index finger slowly unhooked itself from the blaster carbine's trigger. As it did so the glow rod's backlight washed all color from the digits. The finger straightened and Corran saw bones pointing at him. *It's over. We'll both be skeletons left here to molder forever.*

Then the blue bolt shot from the carbine's muzzle. The air crackled and Corran's hair stood on end as the bolt sizzled past him and hit Thyne. The blue nimbus resulting from the shot sent a tingle through Corran's body and weakened him enough that he fell to his hands and knees. Behind him Thyne's body hit the ground with a heavy thump accompanied by the light clatter of the blaster pistol dancing off into the darkness.

Hal dropped to one knee beside his son, then pumped another stun round into Thyne. "Are you okay, son?"

Corran sat back on his heels. “I will be.” He rubbed at the side of his neck with his right hand. “He gave me a bruise to balance the one Kast gave me. Having blaster bruises on my head and neck is an experience I could have done without.”

“Beats having the bolts hit home, as our friend here discovered.”

Corran looked at Thyne in the light from Hal’s carbine. The area around Thyne’s right eye had begun to swell indicating where the bolt had hit him. “How did you ...?”

Hal smiled. “The little gold diamond in his eye gave me a great target. I just focused on it—setting aside my concerns for you so I could—and hit him.”

He frowned at his father. “No, not that. You had your finger clear of the trigger and the gun fired anyway. How did you do that? The spice vapor back there give you some sort of telekinetic power or something?”

“Me, move something with the power of my mind?” Hal shook his head and brandished the carbine. “This is a *botshot*. At the same time I pulled my index finger off the trigger, I was able to bring my middle finger up and stroke the trigger. Nothing special or unusual, just sneaky.”

Despite the smile on his father’s face, and the cold logic of his answer, Corran couldn’t shake the feeling that his father wasn’t telling the entire truth. *He probably doesn’t want me to know how chancy his move was, but at least he had the guts to make it. I wouldn’t have wanted to be in his boots for all the spice in the galaxy.*

Hal handed Corran Thyne’s blaster pistol, then hauled Thyne to his feet and tossed him over his shoulder. “I can feel a breeze from ahead. We’re almost clear.”

Corran retrieved his own blaster carbine and carried it by the pistol-grip in his left hand while using the blaster pistol in his right hand and its glow rod to light their way out. “I see something up ahead. Stars and Selonia out there.”

The two CorSec agents got clear of the cavern fairly easily. The mouth of it had been blocked with a lattice of iron bars with

a door in it similar to those of the prison they'd escaped earlier. Corran shot the lock open then led the way out into a small grassy clearing.

Hal laid Thyne out on the ground and brought his blaster carbine to hand again. "Check him for a comlink. We can call for transport to come get us."

Corran knelt over the body and began to search it when a vaguely mechanical sounding voice snapped an order at him.

"Drop the weapons, hands in the air." The first of eight stormtroopers emerged like ghosts from the trees surrounding the clearing. Their armor bone-white in the reflected moonlight, they made themselves very easy targets. The fact that each of them brandished a blaster carbine prompted Corran to raise his hands. *I can't imagine any of them has a weapon set on stun.*

Hal lowered his carbine to the ground carefully. "I'm Inspector Hal Horn and this is my partner, Corran Horn. We're with CorSec. We've just apprehended Zekka Thyne."

The leader of the stormtroopers approached Hal. "Looks as if you are trying to help Thyne escape and are lying to me."

Corran frowned. "What a stupid conclusion to draw. I don't know why you've got that big helmet to protect your head because there clearly isn't anything you're putting to good use under it."

The stormtrooper swung his gun to cover Corran. "On your feet, Black Scummer."

Corran glanced at his father as he stood. "I guess we're their prisoners."

The stormtrooper shook his head. "Who said anything about taking prisoners?"

Hal's voice came low and calm, but full of intensity and power. "I think I would want a specific order from a superior about shooting us. I think to operate otherwise would seriously jeopardize your career, and possibly your life."

The stormtrooper reoriented himself toward Hal and Corran thought for a moment he'd have to jump the man to prevent him

from shooting Hal. Corran would have gone for him, too, because he'd seen countless bodies that had ended up dead for making remarks that were no where near as confrontational. What held him back was the way the man's movements slowed as he watched Hal. The stormtrooper wasn't reacting to the tone or challenge in the words, he was clearly considering their full import.

*Will wonders never cease?*

A comlink clicked inside the man's helmet and the murmurs of conversation hummed into the night. Corran smiled and shrugged at his father. Hal winked back and allowed himself the start of a grin.

The stormtrooper's head came up. "It'll be a minute or two wait."

Hal nodded, then jerked a thumb back toward the cave mouth. "You'll want to have your squad secure that cavern. It leads back into Thyne's office. Your people can get inside and hit the towers from below because if shooting starts, your people are going to die taking that place."

The stormtrooper thought for a moment, then sent half his squad forward. The remaining trio set themselves up to watch the clearing perimeter while the leader kept his blaster on Corran and his father. The night air had become a bit chilled and the fact that he'd been sweating earlier became readily apparent to Corran.

"Mind if I lower my arms? I'm getting cold."

The stormtrooper shook his head. "You can get colder."

"Nice night, isn't it?" Corran gave the man a toothy grin and hiked his arms up higher.

A soldier in the olive drab uniform of the Imperial Army broke through the brush, flanked by two more stormtroopers. The eight bar box with rank cylinders on each side worn on his chest proclaimed him to be a Colonel. His dark-eyed gaze flicked between father and son, then lingered on Thyne's body. "Zekka

Thyne. You may put your hands down. I take it you must be the CorSec agents.”

Hal nodded. “Hal Horn. This is my son, Corran. I have a disc that identifies me in my shoe. It also contains the open warrant CorSec has for searching this place and arresting Thyne. I can dig it out for you, if you wish, to prove who we are.”

“I’m Colonel Veers and I believe you are who you say you are. My source indicated you would be coming out somewhere in this vicinity and even suggested we might want to backtrack you.” He glanced at the stormtrooper who had threatened to kill them. “Apparently my reasons for dispatching this squad around here were not fully understood.”

Hal shrugged. “No one got lit up, so no problem.”

Corran pointed to Thyne. “We’ve gotten the nastiest of them out of there. There aren’t many people left in there and, by now, they should all be Thyne’s people.”

Hal nodded. “You can safely consider it a free-fire zone.”

“I’ll remember that if they give us a reason to go in.” Veers smiled. “You didn’t happen to notice any signs of Rebel agents or Rebellion supplies in there by any chance?”

“No, but as a CorSec Inspector, I do believe it is within my discretion to ask for assistance in serving a warrant and apprehending suspects.” Hal looked at the hillsides on either side of the valley. “I *should* check with my liaison officer, but calling back to Crescent City from here would be impossible, so I guess I’m on my own.”

Veers shook his head. “Pity.”

“Indeed.” Hal waved a hand toward the cavern. “Colonel, if you and your squad would care to assist me, I would be most appreciative.”

“We always like working closely with local officials.” Veers gave Hal a nod and pointed his stormtroopers at the black hole. “You heard him. No waiting for them to shoot first, we’re clear to go.”



The stormtroopers jogged forward in a clatter of armor. Veers handed Hal a comlink. "Your transit code word is 'masterpiece.' At our perimeter just commandeer one of our landspeeders to get your prisoner out of here."

"Thanks." Hal, looking back toward the cave, pointed at a stream of green laser bolts coming from one of the mansion's towers toward the ground. "Looks like your war has started."

"Then we'll get in quickly and end it." Veers gave them a brief salute and ran off with his men.

Corran looked after the Imperial officer. "I thought Imps believed in leading from the rear."

"Not all of them, it seems." Hal grabbed Thyne's hands and hauled the man up onto his back. "Get the ankles there, will you?"

"Sure." Corran grabbed Thyne's ankles and trailed behind his father. "So, is this the end of Black Sun on Corellia?"

"I doubt it. Two CorSec agents, a handful of smugglers and a bounty hunter who isn't a bounty hunter aren't going to be enough to bring Black Sun down. Even if the Colonel and his people level that place, Prince Xizor still has enough power and the resources to restore it to what it was before, and you have to know there are countless individuals willing to take Thyne's place."

Corran shivered. "Yeah, I'm afraid you're right. How depressing."

"Depressing?" Hal turned and looked back at his son. "It's not depressing. As long as there are Horns to catch criminals, Prince Xizor is welcome to send all he cares to in our direction."

"And you don't find that prospect depressing?" Corran frowned at him. "If it isn't depressing, what is it?"

"I think it's obvious, son." Hal's hearty laugh blotted out the whines of blasters being fired back and forth. "It's job security. It may not be easy work, and it's dangerous quite a bit of the time, but it's work that holds evil at bay and there's nothing better you can devote your life to doing."

Corran nodded and recalled a bit of conversation he'd had with Riij Winward. "And what will we do when the only evil left in the galaxy is the Empire?"

"That's a good question, Corran, a very good question." Weariness seemed to creep into his father's voice. "It's one that each person must answer for himself. I just hope, when the time comes for me to answer it, I'll have the wisdom to choose the right answer and the strength to act upon it."

"Me, too."

"You will, Corran, no doubt about that." Hal gave him a wink and a nod. "When the time comes, you'll see the light and those wallowing in darkness who move to oppose you will regret that decision throughout what little remains of their lives."

## **Side Trip Part Four**

### **by Timothy Zahn**

Zekka Thyne's airspeeders were stored on the low end of a split-level section of the fortress roof, inside a bunker-like structure with a single entrance from the stronghold proper and a single hangar bay-style exit. Two guards were on duty, but their attention was turned outward, toward the distant blaster fire coming from the woods around the fortress, and neither noticed the shadowy bulk of Rathe Palror moving quietly up behind them. A pair of deceptively gentle-looking hand movements from the Tunroth, and both guards temporarily lost the ability to notice anything.

"I'll have to get you to teach me that trick," Trell commented, ducking down to peer through the window of a likely looking airspeeder. The vehicle looked ordinary enough, but in the dim light he could see the add-on weapons control board tucked coily away under the main panel on the passenger side. Perfect. "We'll take this one. You still have that molecular stiletto?"

"Here," the Tunroth rumbled, pausing in his task of stripping the guards' weapons to dig the slender cylinder from his belt.

“Should we not take one of the armored vehicles instead?” he added, pointing his chin horns toward one of the three KAAC Freerunners parked near the wide exit opening as he lobbed the weapon in Trell’s direction.

“They’re a little obvious for in-town driving,” Trell told him as he caught the stiletto. Extending the almost invisible blade, he began carefully cutting around the air-speeder’s lock mechanism. “This one’s got some hidden firepower—means it’s probably got some hidden armor, too.”

By the time Palror joined him, he had the door open and was sitting in the driver’s seat. “Yeah, this’ll do just fine,” he said, pulling the weapons board out for a closer look. “Are you hunters any good with non-traditional stuff like light laser cannon and concussion grenade launchers?”

“A *shturlan* can work with all weapons,” Palror said, dropping his appropriated blaster rifles onto the rear seat and peering in over Trell’s shoulder.

“Good—you’re hired,” Trell said, starting to strap himself in. “I’ll drive.”

Trell wasn’t sure what exactly was happening out in the woods surrounding Thyne’s fortress. But whatever it was, it definitely seemed to be getting worse. The forest was alive with the muted flickers of multiple blaster fire, the light peeking coyly out through gaps in the leaf canopy on at least two sides of the stronghold. “I sure hope they’re too busy out there to bother with us,” he muttered as he eased the airspeeder through the opening and onto the landing pad just outside the bunker. “Corran and Hal are going to have their hands full getting through all that.”

“But less trouble than it could be,” Palror said. “Do you not remember? Thyne has dispersed many of his people on errands.”

Trell grimaced. “Yeah, I remember. One group to go grab our cargo, the other to snatch Maranne and Riij.”

“But at Jodo Kast’s recommendation,” Palror reminded him. “If Kast is truly here to oppose Thyne, then he will not allow harm to come to our companions.”

“I don’t buy that,” Trell growled. “Even if Corran and Hal were right about that, it doesn’t mean he cares slork droppings about the rest of us. *And* that assumes they were right, which we don’t have any proof of. Personally, I’d say there’s an even chance that Thyne and Kast cooked up the whole thing together to expose a couple of undercover CorSec agents and lure ’em into a trap. In which case, they’re probably already dead.”

“If so, then we should be likewise,” Palror pointed out. “Who are we that Kast would allow us to escape.”

“Yeah, well, we haven’t exactly escaped yet,” Trell reminded him tartly, eying the open air off the edge of the landing pad with stomach-churning apprehension. But procrastination wouldn’t gain them anything except increased odds that someone inside the fortress would notice they were missing and raise the alarm.

And besides—thanks to Kast—Maranne and Riij were walking into a trap out there at the Mynock’s Haven cantina. Had possibly already walked into it. Riij he wasn’t so much worried about—the guy was a Rebel agent and not his responsibility. But Maranne was his partner, and he was shrugged if he’d abandon her to Thyne’s thugs.

“We waste time,” Palror rumbled at his side. “I will not leave Riij in danger.”

“Likewise,” Trell said, keying in the repulsorlifts and throwing power to the drive. He wouldn’t leave Maranne, and Palror wouldn’t leave Riij; and as the fortress roof dropped away beneath them he realized with hindsight’s usual clarity that Kast had probably set up the various groupings with precisely those different loyalties in mind.

Though to what end, he still didn’t know. And wasn’t sure he wanted to.

He was still mulling over the question thirty seconds later when the two TIE bombers dropped neatly into formation beside him.

They'd been sitting in the Mynock's Haven for nearly half an hour; and in Riij Winward's opinion, it was yet another bust. "They're not coming," he said quietly to the woman on the other side of the small table. "Whoever we were supposed to meet here, they aren't coming."

"I think you're right," Maranne Darmic growled back, scratching viciously at the nape of her neck. "Score another big fat zero for the great and marvelous Jodo Kast."

"The greatly incompetent, you mean," Riij said, looking with distaste at the yellow and red jebwa flower in the center of their table. Kast's datacard had specified the flower as their identification marker, but so far none of the cantina's other patrons had given it a second glance. Considering the clientele, most of their first glances had been humiliating enough.

"Yeah," Maranne agreed. "It makes you seriously wonder about his chances of getting Trel and Palror and the others out of Zekka Thyne's place."

"It makes *me* wonder if he even wants to get them out," Riij countered darkly.

Maranne eyed him closely. "You think this whole thing was a setup?"

"It's looking more and more that way," Riij said, scowling as he glanced around the cantina. "Look at the series of events. First he sends Trel to the wrong booth in Treasure Ship Row, which apparently tips off Thyne and his people that we're looking for Borbor Crisk. Then he sends Trel, Palror, and Hal back and lets them get snatched. Finally, he goes there himself with Corran and sends us off on this idiot's errand. Someone in Kast's business can't possibly be that incompetent and have survived this long."

"You think it's someone else posing as Kast?" Maranne suggested. "I mean, all we've ever seen is his armor."

“Possibly,” Riij said. “But now remember where this whole mess actually started: aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer.”

“With us squeezed into running an Imperial captain’s errand.” Maranne swore gently. “You’re right. How stupid can one group of people be, anyway?”

“We’re in line for some prizes, all right,” Riij agreed. “The only question is what exactly the game is that the Imperials are playing.”

“I vote for them trying to stir up trouble between Thyne and Crisk,” Maranne said. “Maybe looking for an excuse to come down hard on both sides.”

“Using the spice and gems as bait,” Riij said. “Still, whatever Kast’s going for, there’s one thing he doesn’t know.”

Maranne smiled tightly. “That the cargo isn’t aboard the *Hopskip* anymore.”

“Exactly.” Riij dropped a couple of coins on the table and stood up. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Crisk’s people aren’t going to show.”

“So what’s our next move?” Maranne asked, standing up beside him.

“Kast’s Plan B, I guess,” Riij said, turning toward the door and elbowing them a path through a pack of loiterers. “We take our sample boxes to Thyne’s fortress and see if we can make a deal to buy Trel and Palror out.”

Maranne caught up to his side. “You’re going to follow *Kast’s* plan?” she asked incredulously. “What are you, crazy?”

“No, just desperate,” Riij conceded grimly. “Aside from the two of us storming the place, I don’t see any other options.”

“What about your—” Maranne threw a quick glance around and lowered her voice. “What about your friends?”

Riij grimaced. His friends: the Rebel Alliance. A reasonable enough request, he supposed, especially since the only reason he and Palror had been aboard the *Hopskip* in the first place was to baby-sit the load of blasters Trel and Maranne had agreed to smuggle to the Rebels on Derra IV. Unfortunately—“They can’t

help us,” he told her regretfully. “Even if the leaders agreed, it would take too long to gather together enough of a force to take on Thyne, Corellian Security, *and* the local Imperial garrison.”

“You sure they just don’t want Prince Xizor and Black Sun mad at them?” Maranne asked nastily.

“You have to pick your fights carefully, Maranne,” Riij sighed. “Personally, I think we’ve already bit off more than we can swallow.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Maranne muttered. “Fine. Let’s give Plan B a try.”

They had reached the door now, sliding their way through the middle of an incoming group of Duros and heading out into the muggy night air. The *Hopskip*’s dilapidated landspeeder was parked in the small lot to the left—

“Excuse me?” a hesitant voice called.

Riij turned, his hand dropping automatically to the butt of his blaster. A heavyset man had emerged from the cantina a handful of steps behind them, their jebwa flower clutched in a meaty hand. “Yes?”

“You forgot your flower,” the man said, lobbing it through the air toward him. Automatically, Riij reached up to catch it—

And suddenly there was a small blaster in the heavy man’s fist. “Nice and easy,” the man said. “Selty?”

“I’m on it,” a voice said from somewhere behind Riij. There was a quick set of approaching footsteps, and Riij felt his blaster being lifted from its holster. Another moment, and Maranne had been disarmed as well. “Got’em.”

“Now just keep moving,” the first gunman said, gesturing Riij and Maranne in the direction they’d been going. “Let’s go take a look at your landspeeder.”

The parking lot was dark and deserted. But it wasn’t going to stay deserted for long. Even as Riij led the way toward the landspeeder he could see shadowy forms drifting in from all directions. Whoever had gotten the drop on them didn’t seem



interested in taking any chances. “You want to tell us which one’s yours?” the heavyset man asked.

“You want to tell us whose side you’re on?” Riij countered.

The other’s eyes flashed. “Don’t push it, scum,” he warned harshly. “You’re in enough trouble with us as it is.”

“Must be with Zekka Thyne,” Maranne said ruefully.

“Must be,” Riij agreed, his heart pounding a little harder. So it was definitely to Plan B now. “It’s that dirt-brown one over there.”

Two of the approaching thugs veered toward the landspeeder, the rest forming a loose but competent enough guard circle around the prisoners and their two escorts.

A double-sided circle, Riij noted with interest, with as many of their members facing outward as inward. Expecting trouble, maybe?

The thugs had the storage compartment open now and with grunts of satisfaction hauled out the two *sleight* boxes. “Got ’em, Grobber,” one of them said. “Couple of *sleight* boxes, just like the man said.”

“All set to fill up, huh?” the heavyset man said, throwing a dark look at Riij. “I guess Kast wasn’t blowing smoke rings after all.”

Riij threw a glance at Maranne, got the same look in return from her. They’d been right; Kast was definitely playing some crazy double- or triple-edged game here. “Kast told you about this?” he asked.

“Sure did,” Grobber assured him. “So what were these for, the first payment?”

Riij shook his head. “Sorry, but I can’t help you. We were hired to deliver the boxes and that was it.”

“Sure,” Grobber growled. “Just deliver the boxes. And if Crisk just happened to fill them up while your back was turned—well, hey, that’s none of your business, right? Promk, what the frink are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” one of the men at the landspeeder retorted. He had carried one of the boxes around to the hood and was in the process of popping the seal with a knife. “A couple of wise guys, a couple of empty boxes; I figured it might be fun to send ’em on to Crisk with their heads inside.”

Riij was suddenly aware of his collar pressing against his throat. “I don’t think that would be a good idea,” he said, striving to keep his voice even. “You don’t know where the rest of the boxes are.”

“We don’t, huh?” Grobber sneered, digging out a comlink and thumbing it on. “Skinkner? Hey, Skinkner, look alive.”

“Funny, Grobber, funny,” a twisted voice came back. “What d’ya want?”

“You at the Dewback Storage Warehouse yet?”

“Yeah, ’course we are. If you were hoping to report us to Thyne for slogging off, you’re out of luck.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” Grobber said, sending another sneer toward Riij. “Still think we don’t know where the rest of the boxes are, hotshot?”

Riij felt his stomach tighten. So much for Plan B. So much, too, for any leverage they might have had against Thyne and his mob. Any chance of rescuing Palror and Trell was now squarely in his and Maranne’s laps.

Assuming they were able to find a way out of this, their own private mess. Carefully, keeping his movements casual, Riij looked around the ring of thugs, trying to formulate some kind of reasonable plan—

*“Mother of smoke!”*

Riij jerked his head back around. Standing beside the landspeeder, Promk had finally gotten the *sleight* box open ... and even in the faint light Riij could see the stunned look on his face. “Grabber—you gotta—what the frinking—?”

“Have you gone dust-happy?” Grabber demanded, striding toward him. He got two steps, and then suddenly his face

changed, too. "What the—?" he gasped, all but leaping the rest of the distance to Promk's side.

Riij sniffed the night breeze carefully, caught the faint odor of spice. "You were saying something about empty boxes?" he asked.

Grabber ignored him. "Get the other one open," he ordered, pulling out a knife of his own and probing delicately into the spice. "Selty, get over here. The rest of you, watch for trouble."

Selty joined his boss as Promk brought around the second box and set to work, and for a moment the two thugs conversed in low voices over the spice box. The debate was interrupted by the crack of breaking duraplast, and the two joined Promk by the second box.

Someone whisded in awe. "Grabber—are those—?"

"Durindfire gems," Grabber said, lifting his eyes like twin turbolasers to Riij's face. "Let's have it, pal, and let's have it straight and fast. What the frink kind of game are you playing, anyway?"

"I told you before: we're not playing any games," Riij told him. "We were sent to deliver the cargo, and that's it. If there's a game going on, someone else is running it."

"Kast," one of the other thugs snarled.

"Or Kast and Crisk," Grabber snarled back, yanking out his comlink again. "Skinkner? Wake up, Skinkner."

"What d'ya want?" the other's voice demanded. "Frink it all, Grabber—"

"Shut up and listen," Grobber bit out. "You looked in any of those boxes yet?"

"'Course not. Thyne said to just watch them until Crisk's blaster-boys came to fill them with—"

"You idiot—they're already full," Grobber snapped. "Which means the contract's already been filled."

The voice on the comlink swore. "Kast."

"That's my bet," Grobber said. "Start getting your boys together—I'm going to raise Control." He keyed the comlink again. "Control? This is Grobber. Control?"

"Grobber!" a new voice half barked, half gasped. "We've been trying to raise you for half an hour—where the frink are you?"

"At the Mynock's Haven," Grobber said. "Listen—"

"No, *you* listen," the other cut him off. "We're under attack here, skrag it—you've got to get back right away."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Grobber said. "What attack? Who's attacking?"

"Who do you think? The frinking Imperials, that's who."

Grobber threw a startled glance at Selty. "The *Imperials*?"

"Started out as some anti-Rebel operation," Control said. "At least, that's what they told us. Then someone took a shot at them, and suddenly here they are, burning their way through the east wall."

"Skrag! Where's Thyne?"

"I don't know—we can't find him."

"Must have gotten out," Selty muttered.

"Or ducked into some private bunker," Grobber said. "All right, Control, we're on our way. Skinkner?"

"We're packing up, too," Skinkner's voice confirmed. "You want us to do anything with these other *sleight* boxes?"

"To blazes with the boxes," Control snapped. "We need you *here*."

"No, pack 'em up and bring 'em along," Grobber said.

"Grobber—"

"They're worth a fortune," Grobber growled. "Thyne'll have our heads if we leave 'em behind. Come on, how much trouble can a few Imperials be?"

Faintly over the comlink came the sound of a distant explosion. "That answer your question?" Control snarled. "Get the frink back here."

And with a sudden hiss, the comlink went dead. "They're jamming it," Grobber growled, shoving the cylinder back into his

belt. “Selty, you take Promk and Bullkey and get these two and their landspeeder back to the fortress. Everyone else, back to the airspeeders. *Move* it!”

The others scattered. “Don’t get any ideas,” Grobber warned softly, glaring from under creased eyebrows at Rij and Maranne. “We’re a long ways from being done with you two yet.”

With that he stomped off after the rest of his mob, disappearing just as they had appeared back into the shadows again. “Get over here,” Selty snapped, waving Rij and Maranne forward. Somewhere in the distance an avian or insect whistled, sounding strangely out of place in the urban setting. “Bullkey?”

“I’m on ’em,” a deep voice came from behind Rij, the confidence backed up by a blaster nudge in the back. “Come on, move it.”

Rij started forward; and as he did so, Maranne veered slightly toward him and nudged him with her elbow. “Get ready,” she murmured, just loud enough for him to hear. At the landspeeder Promk, under Selty’s direction, had picked up the box containing the Durindfire gems and was carrying it back toward the storage compartment. The strange avian whistled again; and suddenly, inexplicably, one of the bottom edges of the box split open, spilling the gems out onto the ground.

“Promk!” Selty squeaked, aghast. “You stupid idiot.” He jumped forward, grabbing at the box as Promk tried to turn it upside down. For a moment they both fumbled with it, the prisoners temporarily forgotten—

And from behind Rij came a short gurgle and a muffled thump.

Beside him, he sensed Maranne preparing to charge. “Not yet,” he muttered, touching her warningly as he lengthened his stride. Preoccupied with the spilled gems, Selty and Promk hadn’t yet noticed what had happened over here. Another four paces ... three ... if they’d just fight with the box another few seconds ... one....

"Now," he murmured; and jumping forward, he put his left palm down on the landspeeder's hood and leaped over the vehicle to slam both feet hard against Promk's chest.

The thug didn't even have a chance to gurgle as he hit the ground, the *sleight* box spinning out of his hands into the darkness. Selty did have time for a startled curse and a grab for his holstered blaster before he went down with Maranne on top of him. A savage jab with her knee, and he went limp.

"Are you injured?" Palror rumbled from behind them.

"No, we're fine," Rij assured him, regaining his balance and turning around. Behind the Tunroth, the third thug was lying in an unnaturally crumpled heap. "Nice job with Bullkey," he added.

"Not to mention the box," Maranne added, retrieving their appropriated blasters from Selty's belt and tossing Rij's back to him. "How'd you manage that one?"

"That was mine," Trell said, stepping out from behind one of the other parked landspeeders and crossing to them. "Just an exquisitely well-thrown molecular stiletto."

"A whistle code and a molecular stiletto," Rij said, shaking his head wonderingly. "You two are just full of tricks, aren't you?"

"The stiletto was a gift," Trell said, crouching down beside the *sleight* box. "Blast—the blade's broken."

"Never mind the blade," Maranne said, crouching down beside him. "Get the gems."

"Forget the gems," Rij told her, peering off in the direction Grobber and the others had gone. The rescue had been remarkably quiet; but if Grobber took it into his head to fly over this spot on the way back to Thyne's fortress, the four of them could still end up fertilizing a patch of razor grass. "Let's just get out of here."

"But—"

"No, he's right," Trell said through clearly clenched teeth. "If whatever's going on back at Thyne's place dies down fast enough we could still find Grobber's buddies camping out in the

*Hopskip's* cargo bay. Just grab the box and whatever's still left inside."

Maranne hissed something vile sounding, but she nevertheless stood up, the now half-empty box in her hands. "Fine," she said bitterly. "What about the spice?"

"Leave it here," Trell told her. "Corran said we wouldn't want to get caught shipping spice, and I'm rather inclined to agree with him."

"We can call CorSec on the way and tell them where to pick it up," Rijj added. "Now let's *go*."

They all piled into the landspeeder. "Speaking of Corran and CorSec," Trell commented as he spun the vehicle around and kicked power to the engines. "Turns out they're one and the same."

"Corran's with Corellian Security?" Maranne asked, frowning at him. "You're joking."

"That's how he and Hal were talking, anyway," Trell said. "Last we saw, they were heading off after Thyne."

Rijj winced. "In the middle of Thyne's fortress? They haven't got a chance."

"That was also our estimation," Palror agreed. "But counting the number of Thyne's warriors here and those fighting the Imperials outside his stronghold, it seems likely the core areas within may have been nearly deserted."

"'Nearly' might not have been good enough," Maranne said. "And what about Kast? He was still there, wasn't he?"

"I've given up trying to guess what kind of game Kast is playing," Trell said, twisting the landspeeder hard to get around a Herglic-parked speeder truck. "All I know is that he's the one who gave Corran the molecular stiletto that got us out of there."

"And we do not believe it was merely a trap," Palror added. "We were challenged by Imperial TIE bombers as we left the stronghold; yet upon identification, we were permitted to pass."

“That had to be Corran and Hal’s doing,” Trell said. “CorSec’s supposed to be working pretty closely with the Imperials these days.”

“Yes,” Rijj murmured, thinking back to the brief argument he’d had with Corran about the Rebellion. And now to find out Corran was actually CorSec. Could he have guessed Rijj’s true loyalties from that conversation?

“We were both permitted to pass,” Palror reminded him softly.

“I understand,” Rijj told him. “I also understand that the way everything else here’s been going, that doesn’t mean a whole lot. If we get to the *Hopskip* without running into an ambush—from any of the sides of this crazy powerplay—then maybe I’ll believe we’ve gotten away with it.”

“Gotten away with what?” Maranne asked.

Rijj spread his hands. “With whatever in blazes we did here.”

There was indeed no ambush poised outside the *Hopskip*. Nor were any of their former companions—Corran, Hal, or Kast—waiting there.

What *was* there was a single datacard.

“Looks like the same stuff that Kast used to stick the molecular stiletto to Corran’s cell bars,” Trell commented, poking experimentally at the bits of adhesive residue that had been left on the datacard. “Should we read it here, or inside?”

“Inside,” Rijj said firmly, taking the datacard from him and glancing around. “And not until we’re out of here. You and Maranne get the pre-flight started; Palror and I’ll check to make sure no one left us any surprises.”

Trell had the engines nursed and sputtering to life, and Maranne had the nav computer working on their course, when Rijj and Palror returned from their tour of the ship. “Looks clean,” Rijj told the others as the two of them took their seats. “Or at least, there’s nothing obvious. You talked to the tower yet?”



“We’re third in line to leave,” Maranne told him. “You want to read us a sleepy-time story now?”

“Sure,” Rijj said. From behind Trell came a faint rubbing sound—Rijj getting the last bits of adhesive off the datacard, probably—and then the brief scraping as he slid it into his datapad. “It’s from Kast,” Rijj said. “ ‘To the crew and passengers of the *Hopskip*: well done.’ ”

“Well *done*?” Maranne growled. “What in blazes—?”

“Shh,” Trell cut her off. “Go on.”

“You have adequately completed the mission that was assigned you,” Rijj continued. “You may return now to the *Admonitor* and retrieve your cargo. This datacard will serve as proof to Captain Niriz that you have fulfilled your side of the bargain and may have your cargo returned to you.’ Then it’s signed with his name and what looks like some kind of ID mark.”

“So he’s not going back, huh?” Trell said, an odd feeling stirring in the pit of his stomach. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“He must have arranged his payment to be delivered somewhere else,” Maranne said. “It didn’t look like he and Niriz got along very well.”

“Perhaps his payment is in the remainder of the *sleight* boxes,” Palror said.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Rijj said. “There’s a postscript: ‘Do not return to the Dewback Storage Warehouse for the other *sleight* boxes. They are empty.’ ”

“What?” Trell growled, half turning to glare back at Rijj over his shoulder. “Come on, now, that’s just crazy. You’re telling me the two boxes you happened to take to the Mynock’s Haven were the only ones with anything in them? What are the odds of that happening?”

“Not too bad, really,” Maranne said grimly. “Not when you consider that they were the only two we knew we could open and then reseal again. They were leading us around by the nose the whole way, weren’t they?”

“The whole way,” Rijj agreed. “ ‘And don’t bother with either the Durindfire gems or the spice. Both are counterfeit.’ ”

Trell looked across the cockpit, to find Maranne looking back at him. There didn’t seem to be anything to say.

There was another faint scraping behind him as Rijj pulled the datacard from the datapad. “Look, we got in and out again alive,” he reminded them, reaching over Trell’s shoulder to hand him the datacard. “My instructors used to say that no mission you walked away from was a complete failure. Maybe we’ll meet Corran and Hal someday and find out what this whole thing was all about.”

Trell turned the datacard over in his hand. “I doubt it,” he said. “I’d say chances are good that neither of them knew what was going on, either.”

He slid the datacard into a storage slot on his board. “Come on, Maranne. Let’s get out of here.”

“I know this sort of thing embarrasses you,” Captain Niriz said as he poured his guest a glass of aged R’alla mineral water, “so I’ll only say it once. When I heard the reports of military action on Corellia, I was concerned for your safety. I’m glad to find out my fears were unfounded.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Grand Admiral Thrawn said, accepting the proffered glass and taking a sip. He was still wearing his Jodo Kast armor, though without the helmet and gauntlets. “You’re wrong, though, about expressions of concern and support being an embarrassment. On the contrary, loyalty is one of the two qualities I value most in my subordinates and colleagues.”

“And the other?” Niriz asked, pouring a glass of R’alla water for himself.

“Competence,” Thrawn said. “Has the *Hopskip*’s cargo been reloaded aboard yet?”

“It’s being done, sir,” Niriz said. With most people, he thought distantly, the addition of Mandalorian armor would instantly create a powerful air of strength and mystery. With Thrawn, in contrast, it almost seemed to detract from the sense

of authority that was already there. "The bridge has orders to let me know when they leave." He cocked an eyebrow. "Which reminds me: you promised to let me know what all this was about when you returned."

"And I intend to do so," Thrawn assured him. "I'm waiting for one other person to join us here first."

Behind Niriz, the door slid open. Niriz turned, opening his mouth to reprimand whoever this officer or crewer was who would dare enter the captain's private office without permission—

And an instant later was scrambling to his feet, the harsh words dying in his throat as if they'd been choked to death. The armored figure striding with casual arrogance through the door—

"Ah; Lord Vader," Thrawn said, rising more easily to his feet. "Welcome aboard the *Admonitor*. We're honored by your presence."

"As we are with yours, Admiral Thrawn," Lord Darth Vader said, a distinct edge of challenge in his deep voice. "You're nearly six hours late."

"I know, my Lord, and I apologize for keeping you waiting," Thrawn said, nodding his head deferentially. "As it turned out, I was forced to significantly modify the plan I originally outlined to you."

"But the objective *was* achieved?" Vader demanded.

"It was indeed," Thrawn said. "Zekka Thyne and the Corellian branch of Prince Xizor's Black Sun have been effectively eliminated."

Niriz looked at Thrawn in surprise. "Zekka Thyne? But I thought—"

"You thought the Emperor had an arrangement with Xizor?" Vader demanded, turning that grisly mask toward him.

Niriz swallowed. Vader's reputation concerning flag officers who had displeased him ... but on the other hand, Thrawn demanded absolute honesty from his subordinates. "Yes, my Lord," he said. "I did."

Vader's stiff posture seemed to ease slightly. "For the moment, perhaps, that is true. But such arrangements are made to be altered." He turned back to Thrawn. "Yet I understood there was Imperial action against Thyne's stronghold."

"A small battle only," Thrawn assured him. "And the battle was instigated from Thyne's side, as both sides' recorders will bear out. The record will also show the Imperials were in the area solely because of information their commander received suggesting a Rebel force was gathering in the forest there."

"Information which you supplied, of course?" Vader asked.

"Of course," Thrawn nodded. "And since there can be no possible link between the verification code I used and any of your forces or contacts, Prince Xizor will be unable to create any connection between you and the mysterious informant."

"Yet Imperial troops *were* involved," Vader persisted. "His first thought will certainly be of me."

Thrawn shook his head. "In fact, my Lord, the marginal Imperial involvement will actually tend to exonerate you in his eyes. He would expect you to launch either a full-fledged Imperial attack—which he could easily trace back to you—or else to scrupulously avoid Imperial forces entirely, relying perhaps on your quiet bounty hunter or mercenary contacts. The ambiguity of the actual event will leave him confused and uncertain. Which, I believe, was one of your key objectives."

"It was," Vader said, sounding a little uncertain. "But as you say, Xizor knows of my bounty hunter connections. Even though Jodo Kast is not among them, your assassination of Thyne while disguised as Kast will again lead his attention to me."

Thrawn smiled. "Yes, but I *didn't* assassinate Thyne. I was able to leave his fate in the hands of a pair of undercover CorSec agents."

Vader cocked his head slightly to the side. "I don't recall Corellian Security ever being mentioned in our discussions, Admiral."

"The two agents attached themselves to my group," Thrawn said. "And it was obvious right from the start that they were in Coronet City for the specific purpose of getting to Thyne. It presented such a perfect opportunity that I decided to modify the original plan so that they would be the ones to deal with him."

"Then Thyne isn't dead?"

Thrawn shrugged. "At the very least he's out of power," he said. "Actually, having him in CorSec custody would actually serve your purposes better than a quick death. It would leave Prince Xizor wondering if the Corellians were digging any dangerous secrets out of him. A major distraction; and distraction, I believe, was another of your key objectives."

There was a tone from the comm. Stepping to the console, Niriz keyed it on. "Niriz," he said.

"Hangar Bay Control, sir," a voice said. "Reporting as per orders that the *Hopskip* has just left."

"Thank you," Niriz said. "Signal the bridge to watch its vector when it jumps to lightspeed."

"Yes, sir."

Niriz keyed the comm off. "I gather the smugglers and their Rebel friends performed their part adequately?" Vader asked.

"Quite adequately," Thrawn assured him. "They provided the necessary excuse for me to move Thyne's men out and clear the way for the CorSec agents."

The unseen eyes behind the black mask seemed to bore into Thrawn's face. "And the other part of your plan?"

Thrawn cocked a blue-black eyebrow at Niriz. "Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "A homing device has been installed inside each of the hidden blasters they were smuggling."

"And the boxes repacked exactly as they were?"

"To the millimeter," Niriz confirmed. "They'll have no way of knowing the boxes were even opened, let alone tampered with."

The Dark Lord nodded. "Excellent," he said.

The comm pinged again. "Captain, this is the bridge. The *Hopskip* just jumped to lightspeed. Their vector's confirmed for the Shibric system."

"Thank you." Niriz looked at Thrawn, lifted his eyebrows.

The Grand Admiral nodded. "Have them prepare a course back to the Unknown Regions," he instructed. "Our task here is finished."

"Yes, sir." Niriz gave the order and keyed off the comm.

"Unless," Thrawn added, looking at Vader, "you'd like me to deal with Prince Xizor directly for you."

"It is indeed a tempting thought," Vader said, his voice dark with veiled menace. "One alien against another? But no. Xizor is mine."

"As you wish," Thrawn said. "Incidentally, I doubt that Shibric is the final destination for those Rebel blasters. From their vector, and other bits and pieces I gleaned along the trip, my guess is that their ultimate collection point will be somewhere in the Derra system."

"The homing devices will show us for certain," Vader said. "But the Derra system is rumored to have a strong Rebel presence. I'll make sure to have some forces waiting there."

"Very good," Thrawn said. "One final suggestion, and then I suspect we must both be on our separate ways. I understand the general in command of the *Executor's* ground forces resigned suddenly a month ago. I was able to watch the battle outside Thyne's stronghold for a while as I waited to make sure the smugglers escaped; and in my opinion the Imperial officer in command is being wasted in a garrison assignment."

"Your opinion carries considerable weight," Vader said. "As I'm sure you know. The officer's name?"

"Colonel Veers," Thrawn said. "From the level of his tactical skill, I'd also say he's long overdue for a promotion. Perhaps his political connections within the command structure leave something to be desired."

“Political connections do not concern me,” Vader rumbled, stepping to the door. “I will see what I can do with this Colonel Veers. Thank you, Admiral.”

“My pleasure, Lord Vader,” Thrawn said with a respectful tilt of his head. “One favor for another. Perhaps we’ll have the chance to work again together.”

Once again, the hidden eyes seemed to probe the Grand Admiral’s face. “Perhaps,” he said. “Farewell, Admiral.”

And with a swirl of his long cloak he was gone. “An interesting exercise,” Thrawn commented, crossing to the R’alla bottle and refilling his and Niriz’s glasses. “I don’t know though. I sense that this Rebellion is more powerful and better organized than perhaps Lord Vader realizes. I hope our activities here will allow him to deliver a crushing blow against it.”

His glowing red eyes glittered as he took a sip from his glass. “But that’s not our concern, at least for now. Our concern is the Unknown Regions; and it’s time we were getting back.”

“Yes, sir.” Niriz hesitated. “If I may be so bold, Admiral ... your last comment implied that you received something in return for helping Vader against Thyne and Black Sun. May I ask what that favor was?”

“A very personal gift, Captain,” Thrawn said. “Which was why I felt the need to personally orchestrate Thyne’s destruction. Lord Vader has turned over to me command of a group of alien commandos who have proven themselves highly valuable to him over the years. While I won’t have much use for them in the Unknown Regions, I have no doubt I’ll eventually be returning to the Empire proper. At that time—well, we shall see what they can do.”

“I never heard of Vader employing aliens,” Niriz said doubtfully. “Are you sure he’s telling—well—”

“The truth?” Thrawn smiled. “Indeed he is. Mark their name well, Captain: the Noghri. I guarantee you’ll be hearing more of them.”

He drained his glass and set it down. “But now to the bridge. The Unknown Regions are calling; and we have a great deal of work yet to do.”







# STAR WARS.

## TALES FROM THE NEW REPUBLIC



edited by

**Peter Schweighofer  
and Craig Carey**



**BANTAM BOOKS**

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## Foreword and Acknowledgments

In recent months, the scope of the *Star Wars* universe has expanded beyond our wildest dreams. *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* has given us a detailed view of the *Star Wars* galaxy decades before the adventures of Han, Luke, and Leia. But the era in which those heroes fought and lived remains as popular as ever, and the adventures in this collection chronicle other heroes of that same era—when the Empire still cast an ominous shadow upon the galaxy and the New Republic struggled to maintain order and justice. The exciting stories contained in this anthology feature some of those heroes from the era of the fledgling New Republic; some of the adventures make their debut in this book.

For six months in 1998 I served as the editor of the now-defunct *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*, a position previously held by Peter Schweighofer, editor of *Star Wars: Tales from the Empire* and co-editor of this volume. During my short tenure at the *Journal*'s helm, I was fortunate enough to review work from several of the most popular *Star Wars* authors. In fact, the very first draft I received my first morning in the office was Timothy Zahn's "Jade Solitaire," a new story featuring Mara Jade that introduced characters later seen in *Vision of the Future*.

For this book, our assignment was the relatively simple—but excruciating—task of deciding which stories we would choose from the scores under consideration: some previously published under Peter’s direction and some from my turn as the *Journal’s* editor. Those appearing in this anthology represent the finest *Star Wars* short fiction; they are a diverse group, set in a variety of locales and starring a wide range of characters.

More people than I could list deserve thanks for assistance along the way. Chief among them are the authors—who naturally did all of the hard work and deserve the credit—and Pete, my predecessor. Pete welcomed me aboard the West End staff and not only provided me with a strong example, but also became a good friend. His diligent attention to detail and solid work ethic gave me the steady platform from which an even stronger *Star Wars Adventure Journal* would have been launched. Though those issues never came to be, I thank him for his faith in me and for the opportunity to join him in editing this anthology.

Thanks also go to Pat LoBrutto for leading the way, and our former West End associates for their input, advice, and encouragement. My wife Karrie has supported me in every endeavor and has been a constant source of strength and inspiration. My parents, my brothers Billy and Doug, and the infamous Gotham Highlanders have always been there for me and have supported my pursuits throughout the years.

And thanks finally to all the *Star Wars* fans whose support of the *Journal* and subsequent anthologies has meant a great deal to us both.

—Craig Carey, March 1999

Inspiration and support comes from many sources.

Numerous talented authors, a fine co-editor, and many supportive friends deserve commendations for their work in *Star Wars: Tales from the New Republic*. As an editor, I helped channel others' inspiration and ideas, honing their storytelling skills so they could share these *Star Wars* tales with you. Craig and I enjoyed working with all the authors; each earned their place within these pages.

When West End Games hired Craig Carey to run the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* in January 1998, he brought his professional attitude, boundless enthusiasm, and a positive spirit, all of which I admire. After editing the *Journal* for four years myself, I was pleasantly surprised how well Craig learned all aspects of the job. He provided a firm hand, guiding these stories to their final form. I consider Craig a far better *Journal* editor than I ever was. It has been a pleasure working with him. As circumstances dictated, West End Games never published any of his work. I'm proud to finally see it here.

Many others deserve special thanks for *Tales from the New Republic*. Patrick LoBrutto and Evelyn Cainto at Bantam Spectra provided invaluable guidance and assistance through the logistics of producing this anthology. Timothy Zahn, Michael A. Stackpole, Jean Rabe, John Whitman, and Richard Hawran offered their constant encouragement and friendship. Numerous "dark side" and "light side" friends (and those in between) helped bolster my spirits when things seemed rough. Denise

Clarkston's warmth, kindness, and late-night chats helped put everything in perspective. My family provided firm support and love, as they always have throughout my life, no matter what endeavors I undertook.

Thanks to Lucy Autrey Wilson and Allan Kausch for their official guidance at Lucasfilm. And, of course, George Lucas deserves special thanks for creating movies which inspired us yesterday, excite us today, and will enthrall us in years to come.

—Peter Schweighofer, March 1999

# **Interlude at Darkknell**

## **Part One**

### **by Timothy Zahn**

Senator Bel Iblis?”

Garm Bel Iblis looked up from his datapad, frowning with the subtle tension of prespeech jitters. The man standing in the doorway was the assistant director at the Treitamma Political Center, charged with the responsibility of smoothing any obstacles that might impede the firm step and stalwart tread of an exalted member of the Imperial Senate.

Or so the gentleman had gravely explained upon Bel Iblis’s arrival this afternoon. Clearly the Anchoron reputation for flowery speech and genteel decorum had found a focal point here at the Treitamma.

Which was going to make the bluntness of his speech tonight all the more shocking. The dark truth about Emperor Palpatine and his secret agenda for his newly established Empire ...

He shook his head briefly in annoyance. Assistant Director Graskt was still waiting patiently, and here he was letting his

mind drift. It showed just how seriously this speech—and the situation it represented—had taken over his every waking thought. “Yes, AsDir Graskt, what is it?” he asked.

“A gentleman from your staff has just arrived from Coruscant,” Graskt said, stepping forward and holding out a datacard. “He asked me to deliver this to you right away.”

“Thank you,” Bel Iblis said, the hairs on the back of his neck tingling as he reached across the desk and took the datacard. Sena would never send a package to him without making sure the courier had his private comlink frequency. The fact that there had been no calls concerning any such arrivals ...

He slid the datacard into his datapad. There was nothing on it but a single line: “Meet me at the northeast exit. Urgent. Aach.”

“Will there be a return message, Senator?” Graskt asked.

“No, that’s all right,” Bel Iblis said, long experience in the political arena enabling him to keep the sudden tension out of his voice and face. *Aach* was the code name of a special messenger from Bail Organa, a messenger the Alderaanian viceroy used only for top-level Rebel Alliance business.

“Would you like to speak with the gentleman?” Graskt persisted. “I asked him to wait at the main entrance.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Bel Iblis said. The last thing he could afford was for the two of them to be seen in public together. Besides, Aach had undoubtedly slipped away by now for their more private meeting. “I’ll have plenty of time to see him after my speech.”

“Then the message does not in fact bespeak a crisis?” Graskt asked.

Bel Iblis felt the skin around his eyes crinkle as his eyes narrowed slightly. For someone who had struck him as having taken a double helping of the traditional Anchoroni politeness, Graskt was suddenly being uncharacteristically nosy.

Unless Aach had overplayed his hand in order to make sure the datacard was delivered. But that didn’t seem likely. Could Graskt be a spy for Palpatine, here to keep an eye on him?

He felt a flash of annoyance. No—that was absurd. The man was probably just trying to be helpful. “To middle-level staffers, all news bulletins mean a crisis must be happening somewhere,” he improvised, giving Graskt an easy smile. “It’s important enough, but hardly a crisis. Certainly not worth delaying my speech for.” He looked at his chrono. “Which reminds me, I’m due on stage in fifteen minutes, and I still have to change.”

“I’ll leave you to your preparations, then,” Graskt said. “Good evening, sir.” He bowed deeply and backed out of the room.

Bel Iblis gave him a fifty-count and then followed.

The Treitamma’s northeast exit was off the group of backstage rooms to the left of the main stage, about as far away from the bustling main entrance as it was possible to get. Bel Iblis eased noiselessly down the stairway, alert for the various staffers hurrying around making final preparations for the evening’s round of speeches, and slipped outside.

A landspeeder was parked in the service alleyway behind the Treitamma, gray and muted in the dim evening light. Standing on the far side of the vehicle, pressed into what little shadow there was trying to watch all directions at once, was Aach.

Bel Iblis crossed the alleyway toward him, trying to suppress a grimace and not entirely succeeding. This cloak-and-blade mentality was going to be the end of them yet. “Not being too obvious, are we?” he suggested tartly as he rounded the front of the landspeeder and stopped, facing the other.

“Your preparation room seemed a bit too public for a meeting,” Aach countered, his voice as calm as his face. “Would you rather I showed up at your hotel room after the speech? That could have proved a bit awkward.”

Bel Iblis felt his lip twitch. Awkward, unfortunately, was hardly the word for it. His wife Arrianya, a daughter of the old Core World families, had an unreserved and totally unwavering faith in Palpatine and his Empire, a faith that had first astonished, then baffled, then finally frustrated him. The clash of their differing political views had cast a chill over their marriage the past few

months, and had dropped their two children into the middle of what was all too often a verbal war zone.

The speech he was about to make out there on the Treitamma stage was going to upset Arrianya enough as it was. All he needed was for a shadowy messenger from Bail to show up in the middle of the inevitable argument afterward. “What’s the message?” he growled.

In the dim light he saw Aach’s mouth twitch. “Sorry, Senator. I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t,” Bel Iblis said. “What’s the message?”

Aach looked around the area again. “There’s been a breakthrough,” he said, lowering his voice to something barely above a whisper. “We’ve located Tarkin’s project.”

Bel Iblis felt his throat go suddenly dry. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” Aach said. “All I know is that a courier will be in the Continuum Void tapcafe in the city of Xakrea on Darkknell in three days with some inside information about it. Bail wants you to send your most trusted aide to rendezvous with him and pick up his datapack.”

*Courier.* Bel Iblis glanced around, a bad taste in his mouth. A three would get you the sabacc pot that this so-called “courier” was in fact the thief who’d stolen the datapack in the first place. A minor military figure, most likely, either a trooper or perhaps a clerk attached to the project.

And *two* would get you the sabacc pot that his actions hadn’t been motivated by anything as selfless as love of the Republic. “And how much am I supposed to pay him?”

Aach hesitated, just noticeably. “Bail basically said to give him whatever he wants. Look, we need this information—”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Bel Iblis cut him off. “If we can’t get honest patriotism, we’ll settle for honest greed.”

“That’ll change,” Aach promised, a quiet fire simmering in his voice. “As soon as Palpatine’s agenda finally becomes clear, we’ll have the whole Republic flocking to our side.”



"I'd settle for the top five percent of the Imperial Academy," Bel Iblis said sourly. Now was not the time for brooding about Palpatine's maddening talent for pulling the cloak over people's eyes. "Fine. I'll get one of my people on it as soon as I finish my—"

And with a brilliant flash, the Treitamma Political Center blew up.

Bel Iblis was lying on the ground when he fumbled his way back to consciousness, pressed up against the wall of the building across the alleyway on one side with what was left of the landspeeder looming over him on the other. Behind the landspeeder a ragged section of wall where the Treitamma had been was burning furiously, bathing the whole area with an unreal-looking blaze of yellow light and pouring black smoke into the sky.

"Senator?"

Bel Iblis blinked, shifting his eyes upward. Aach was kneeling over him, a gash in the side of his face streaming blood. "Come on, Senator, we've got to get you out of here," he said urgently, tugging on his arm. "Can you stand?"

"I think so," Bel Iblis said, gathering his feet beneath him. He looked over at the burning building again as Aach helped him to his feet—

And abruptly the haze blanketing his mind seemed to flash-burn away. "Arrianyal!" he gasped. "Aach—my wife and children—"

"They're gone, Senator," Aach said, his voice suddenly vicious. "And you're going to be next if we don't get you out of here right away."

"Leave me alone!" Bel Iblis snarled, trying to push Aach's hand away and staggering as his trembling legs nearly collapsed again beneath him. "I've got to get to them. Let me *alone*."

"No," Aach bit back, tightening his grip on Bel Iblis's arm. "Don't you see? You're the only one they were trying to kill in there. *You*."

Bel Iblis stared at the blazing building, a jolt of fresh pain and emptiness and anger twisting together and cutting into him. No. No—it couldn't be. Destroy a whole building—kill dozens or even hundreds of people—just to get at him? It was insane.

“Looks like they used a thermal detonator,” Aach said, half leading, half pulling Bel Iblis down the alleyway away from the wrecked landspeeder. “Shaped to bring down the Treitamma without demolishing the whole neighborhood. Most likely planted somewhere near your preparation room.”

And Arrianya and the children had been in the private refreshment center chatting with the chief director. Only two rooms away ...

They had reached the end of the alleyway by now. Around the corner of the demolished building, over by the sides and front, Bel Iblis could see a crowd had already gathered, their features unreadable through the smoke and heat-shimmered air. Their screams and shouts, barely audible over the roar of the flames, were like a stab of pain in his heart.

“Over here,” Aach said, pulling him toward a landspeeder parked at the side of the street, its front end crumpled and blistered by the explosion. “You can take my ship—I'll get back to Alderaan some other way.” He pulled open the door and guided Bel Iblis into the passenger seat.

Another layer of the mental haze suddenly cleared from Bel Iblis's mind. “Wait a minute,” he protested, half in and half out of the vehicle. “Arrianya and the children—I can't just leave them.”

“You have to,” Aach said, his voice bitter but firm. “Didn't you hear me? *You* were the target, Senator. You still are. We've got to get you to safety before they realize they missed and try again.”

He closed the door on Bel Iblis and hurried around to the other side. “But what if they're alive?” Bel Iblis demanded, fumbling for the door release as Aach dropped into the driver's seat. “I can't just leave them.”

"They're dead, Senator," Aach said quietly, his face in shadow as he hunched forward and reached up under the control board. "Everyone who was inside is gone, either from the blast itself or from the building's collapse. Whoever Palpatine sent to do the job was very thorough."

With a jolt, the landspeeder started up. "Yes," Bel Iblis murmured, taking one final look at the burning building as Aach spun the vehicle around and headed in the other direction, down the street. "He was indeed."

"And he's not going to give up now," Aach added, pulling hard to the side to get out of the way of a fleet of Extinguisher speeder trucks as they raced past toward the conflagration. A waste of effort, Bel Iblis thought numbly as they passed. There was nothing anyone could do now. "You're going to have to go underground until Bail and Mon Mothma can backtrack this and identify whoever was responsible."

"I suppose so," Bel Iblis said. His left shoulder felt cold, and he looked down to see that the top of his coat there had been torn completely away by some bit of flying debris that the bulk of Aach's landspeeder hadn't protected him from. Odd—he wondered why he hadn't noticed that before.

He was suddenly aware of a watchful silence, and looked over to find Aach eyeing him warily. "Are you all right, Senator?" the other asked. "Did you hear what I said? You have to go away somewhere and hide."

"Yes, I heard you," Bel Iblis said, the pain inside him beginning to give way to a black and simmering anger. In that single instant, a moment frozen forever in time, Palpatine had taken away from him everything he held dear. His wife, his children, his career. His life.

Everything, that is, but one. "And I'll be all right," he went on, "When Palpatine is dead, and what was once the Republic has been restored."

"I understand," Aach murmured. "You're one of us now, Senator."

Bel Iblis frowned at him. "What are you talking about? I've been part of the Rebel Alliance since it was first formed."

"But you were with us for other reasons," Aach said. "Political reasons like Palpatine's abuse of power, or idealistic reasons like erosion of personal freedom or the antialien biases drifting into the legal system."

The muscles in his jaw tightened briefly. "Now Palpatine has hurt you. Not someone else, but you. Now it's personal."

Bel Iblis took a deep breath. "Maybe it is," he conceded. "On the other hand, maybe that's exactly what he wants: to trick us into thinking we're fighting him for purely personal reasons."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is that that kind of battle is driven by emotion," Bel Iblis said. "Eventually, the emotion burns away, and then your reason for continuing the fight is gone."

He fingered the edges of the hole in his coat. "But we're not going to fall into that trap. He can do anything he wants to me—can take anything away from me that he will. I'll still fight him because it's the right thing to do. Period."

For a few minutes they drove on in silence. On the rear display the burning shell gradually receded behind the other buildings of the city, leaving only an angry black-orange pillar of smoke to mark his family's funeral pyre. It seemed terribly wrong somehow to be running away like this, as if he were casually and cavalierly brushing aside their lives and dishonoring their memory.

But no. They were dead, and the dishonor of their blood was solely on Palpatine's hands. All that was left for him now was to do whatever he could to prevent others from dying in the same violent and useless way.

And if the whispered rumors he'd heard about this Death Star project of Tarkin's were even close to the actual truth ... "You said I could take your ship?" he asked Aach.

"Yes, if you feel up to flying it yourself," the other said. "I was thinking I might stay around here a day or two anyway."

“Why? To see if you can find a direct link back to Palpatine?” Bel Iblis shook his head. “I can tell you right now you’ll be wasting your time.”

“It’s my time to waste. Is there a place where you can hide out for a while?”

“There are a couple of possibilities,” Bel Iblis said. “But first I have an appointment to keep on Darkknell.”

“Darkknell?” Aach threw Bel Iblis a startled look. “You?”

“Why not?” Bel Iblis countered. “Who better to make the pickup than someone who’s supposed to be dead anyway? My schedule is now meaningless, you know. And I have no one to miss me if I’m out of sight for a few days. Not anymore.”

“But—” Aach floundered a moment. “Sir, this could be dangerous—any contact with informants has that potential. You’re not trained for this sort of fieldwork.”

“I did my stint in the military,” Bel Iblis reminded him. “I know how to handle a blaster. And I know a bit about disguise, too. I won’t be recognized.”

“But—”

“Besides,” Bel Iblis cut him off quietly, “I need to do something useful right now. Something to help take my mind off... what just happened back there.”

Aach exhaled softly in resignation. “All right, sir. Before you go, though, I’ll give you a letter of introduction to someone I know in Xakrea you can contact if you get in trouble. He doesn’t have any particular sympathy for the Rebellion, but he doesn’t much care for Palpatine’s Empire, either. He’s got a lot of contacts among smugglers and other fringe types on Darkknell, which may come in handy if you have to get off the planet in a hurry.”

“It may,” Bel Iblis agreed, noting with a somewhat grim amusement that Aach had carefully refrained from mentioning his friend’s own status within the fringe society. A smuggler himself, or perhaps a dealer of stolen goods? Or something even more unsavory?

Still, if it came to that, the Rebel Alliance certainly had its own share of unsavory characters. Some had probably been pulled in by the hope of quick profits—though those who had had most likely been disillusioned in record time on that one—but others were among the Alliance’s most tenacious and effective fighters. “Do you trust him?”

Aach shrugged, a bit uncomfortably. “I think so, provided as you don’t push him too hard or ask too much. Or tell him who you are or who you’re working for. Anyway, he owes me a couple of favors.”

“I see,” Bel Iblis murmured. “It’s always comforting to have allies.”

“I could still go with you,” Aach offered, a clear note of reluctance lurking beneath the words. “I was supposed to head back to Alderaan. Under the circumstances I know Bail would understand.”

“No,” Bel Iblis said firmly. “Bail undoubtedly needs you elsewhere, and I can do this myself. You just help me get off Anchoron, and then you’re on your own.”

Aach hesitated, then nodded. “All right, Senator. If you insist.”

Bel Iblis looked back at the rear display, his eyes drawn unwillingly to the roiling tower of black smoke behind them. The shock was starting to wear off now, and a myriad of small injuries and throbbing pains were beginning to make themselves felt across his body.

But none of it could come even close to the bitter ache in his heart. Arrianya and the children ... “Yes,” he said quietly. “I insist.”

The man sitting alone at the table across the crowded tapcafe was blond and fairly short, with the darting eyes and twitching mouth of someone who was somewhere he didn’t want to be. Not much more than a kid, really, which could explain his discomfort at

being in such a villainous lair of vile laxity as the Continuum Void.

On the other hand, his stiff back had an air of the Imperial military about it, and if there was one safe bet in this galaxy, it was that military types and tapcafes rarely needed to be formally introduced.

Moranda Savich sipped at her pale blue drink, wincing at the unfamiliar tang, continuing to study the kid even as she chided herself for letting her thoughts wander off target that way. The only reason she was on Darkknell in the first place, after all, was that it wasn't Kreeling or Dorsis or Mantarran. Inspector Hal Horn of Corellian Security had already tracked her to and chased her off all those worlds, and most likely he'd continue his winning streak by tracking her here, too. The sooner she figured out a quiet way off this rock, the better her chances of staying ahead of him until he gave up and went home.

She snorted gently. Fat chance. Horn wasn't going to give up, at least not in her lifetime. The man was one of that supremely irritating class of law enforcers who combined the menace of incorruptibility with the annoyance of not knowing when to quit.

Across the tapcafe, the kid slipped a hand beneath the left side of his jacket as he glanced around. The second time he'd done that, Moranda noted, in the past ten minutes. Must be something he was having to reassure himself was still there ...

*Stop it!* she ordered herself sternly. She was on the run, and on the run was no time to be swinging for a scratch. Stirring up the locals with a score would be completely counterproductive, especially if she stirred them up enough to catch her with spice or dealies or whatever the kid was carrying that was making him so nervous.

He lifted his cup to his lips, half turning to throw a look toward the tapcafe door, his ninth such check since Moranda had been watching. As he did so, his jacket stretched momentarily against the object in his pocket, giving her a brief glimpse of its

shape. It was square, slightly larger than a datacard, but considerably thicker.

A datapack? Could be. Probably with six to ten datacards, judging from the thickness, snugged together in a protective case.

Moranda swirled the blue liqueur thoughtfully in her glass. Well, now. A datapack put a very different perspective on things. Every police and security operative knew spice and other contraband items on sight or smell or taste; but a simple, innocent-looking datapack was another matter entirely. It was something anyone might be carrying, something that even the most suspicious mouth-breather would have to go to great lengths to prove wasn't her property in the first place.

More to the point, it was something that was likely worth hard, cold money. And money was what she needed if she was going to get out of here ahead of Inspector Horn and his fistful of Corellian warrants.

Which left only one question: how to get the datapack away from its nervous owner without getting caught doing it.

The glowing sign marking the 'fresher stations was against the wall on the far side of the kid's table. Refilling her drink from the carafe, she got up and ambled in that direction, putting a slightly tipsy hesitation into her movements. His jacket was cut Preter style, she noted with a single casual glance as she strolled past him, the sort with a deep inside pocket positioned beneath the armhole on either side. Possibly fastened at the top, but probably not seriously sealed. Still, with the youth hunched over the table the way he was, the only way to get at the datapack would be for her to get him to take the jacket at least partially off.

But that was okay. She enjoyed a challenge.

The 'fresher stations were like the rest of the Continuum Void: old and more than slightly dilapidated. Sealing herself into one, she set her drink down on the crumble-edged shelf and got to work.

The small tiles lining the station were the first target. Pulling out her knife, she pried two of them off the wall, then carefully



trimmed them down to datacard size. Beneath the tiles was a layer of the low-quality honeycomb that served as a passive air filter in low-tier places like this one; a double layer of that sandwiched between her two tiles added the required thickness. One of her diaphanous black scarves wrapped tightly around the pack to hold it together and it was finished. The object didn't look anything like a datapack, but it was the right size and shape and weight. With the proper distraction and the right moves, and maybe a little bit of luck tossed in, it should work.

After digging into her hip pack for a stray cigarra she kept around for just such occasions, she lit it and stuck it between two fingers of her right hand, picking up her glass of liqueur with the fingertips of the same hand. Then, with the decoy datapack concealed as best she could in her left hand, she unsealed the door and headed back into the main tapcafe room.

The kid hadn't moved in the few minutes she'd been gone, nor had the contact he was obviously expecting made an appearance. Holding her decoy datapack unobtrusively at her side, putting a noticeable stagger into her walk now, she started through the crowd toward her table, this time heading for the narrow gap behind the kid. She dodged a drunk Barrckli, sent a warning glare at an unshaven nerf herder type who looked as if he might be starting to get ideas about her, and passed behind the kid—

And with a sudden lurch as if she'd been tripped, she fell heavily against the back of his chair and splashed the contents of her glass across the burning tip of her cigarra onto the back of his jacket.

The liqueur ignited with a muffled *whoosh* into a small but very satisfying fireball.

"Look out!" Moranda gasped, dropping both glass and cigarra onto the floor and grabbing over his right shoulder for the edge of the tablecloth. She yanked it toward her, scattering glasses and tableware in all directions as she hauled it past the side of his head toward the flames dancing across the back of his jacket. Simultaneously, she tugged at the left lapel with the fingertips of

her left hand. Reflexively, he swung his left arm back in response, giving her the necessary slack for pulling the blazing garment away from the back of his neck.

And as she slapped vigorously at the already dying flames with the tablecloth, her left hand dipped down into the inside jacket pocket, lifting out the datapack and leaving her decoy behind in its place.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated over and over in her best embarrassed voice, still pounding the tablecloth across his shoulders even though the fire was already out as she slipped her prize into her hip pack behind her datapad. "So terribly sorry. My ankle went and—are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," the kid growled, twisting half around to his right and grabbing at the tablecloth. "It's out now, right?"

"Oh yes," she said, giving his back one final slap before letting him pull the now wadded tablecloth away from her. "I'm so sorry. Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, forget it," he said, waving her away and trying to turn a little farther around. Trying for a clearer look at her? "Just go away and leave me alone."

"Sure, of course," Moranda said, easing around as she pretended to resettle his jacket back onto his shoulders, staying just out of his sight. Out of the corner of his eye she saw his hand steal beneath his jacket to the pocket. The fingers probed the shape of her decoy and fell away, apparently reassured. "I'm so sorry."

"Go away," he repeated, starting to sound a little angry now. Clearly he wasn't happy at having all this attention focused his way.

"Yeah, sure." Moranda stepped away to his left, and as he twisted his head in that direction, still trying for a clear look at her face, she turned her back to him and worked her way through the crowd toward her table.

She reached it but didn't sit down. The kid's buyer could be here any time now, and she had no intention of being anywhere

in the vicinity when he hauled her decoy triumphantly out of his pocket. Leaving the price of her drink on the table, she slouched her way to the door and out into the tangy Darkknell air. Time to find a nice, quiet place to go to ground for a while and see just what it was she'd scored.

Bel Iblis stared across the tapcafe table at the young blond man, a sense of unreality thudding through his brain in time with the pulse pounding in his neck. "What do you mean, you lost it?" he demanded in a low voice. "How do you *lose* an entire datapack? Especially from within your own coat pocket?"

"Don't use that tone with *me*, friend," the other growled back, his eyes darting nervously around the half-empty room. "And if you're hinting that I'm trying to repulsorlift my price, you'd better think again. I took a huge risk getting that stuff and bringing it here. A *huge* risk. I'm not any happier than you are that it got lifted."

Bel Iblis took a careful breath, trying to throttle back his growing anger. He might not be a Rebel field operative like Aach, but he knew how to read people, and the youth's face and voice had the ring of truth in them.

Which meant they were both now squarely in the middle of an incredibly dangerous position. The minute the thief realized what it was she'd found ... "Is there any way they can trace it back to you?" He asked quietly.

The young man snorted into his cup. "Sure, if they really want to go to that much effort. Knowing Tarkin's reputation, they probably will."

"Then we'll just have to get it back."

The kid snorted again. "*You* can go looking under rocks for it if you want. Me, I'm heading for the tall weeds while I still can."

"You run now and they'll know for sure you were the one who lifted the data," Bel Iblis warned.

“Like that’s going to matter any,” the other countered harshly, draining his cup and bringing it back down onto the table with an unnecessarily loud thud. “She’s not going to sit on this long, you know. And the minute she turns it in, the spaceport’s going to be locked down solid while Tarkin’s people fan out across the planet. You want to wait for that to happen, you be my guest.”

He stood up. “So long, have fun, and forget you ever saw me.”

He strode across the room and vanished out the door. “I’ll try,” Bel Iblis murmured after him. Taking a sip from his mug, he tried to think.

Because his erstwhile drinking companion was wrong. The thief wouldn’t hand her prize over to the authorities just like that. Someone cool enough to lift a datapack in the middle of a crowded tapcafe would also be cool enough to try to turn a profit from her acquisition. And that meant selling the datapack.

Which left only the question of how to persuade her to sell to the Rebel Alliance instead of the Empire.

Fishing in his pocket for some coins, he dropped them onto the table beside his mug and headed for the door. One thing that *was* certain was that he wasn’t going to be able to track her down in a city the size of Xakrea by himself. That meant someone with connections in the planet’s fringe population; and *that* meant getting in touch with Aach’s local contact.

He hoped the man owed Aach a *lot* of favors.

The room was small and dark and sparse, a sharp contrast to the bright lights and scrollwork and expensive glitter that was the norm throughout the rest of the Imperial Palace. It was a shock to most of the uninitiated who came into it, and even those who knew what to expect invariably wasted their first few minutes adjusting their eyes and minds to the contrast.

Which was precisely how Armand Isard liked it. Offbalance people were vulnerable people, and vulnerability was one of his favorite qualities in enemies and allies alike. For allies, after all,

were merely people who had not yet outlived their usefulness to the Empire, the Emperor, and Isard himself.

Ultimately, invariably, all of them did.

His comlink pinged. "Director Isard?" his aide's voice came from the speaker. "Field Operative Isard has arrived."

"Send her in," Armand instructed, allowing himself a smug smile. Not many men, he knew, had daughters who had thrown themselves so willingly and so self-sacrificingly into their father's line of work as had his Ysanne. Already an outstanding Intelligence agent, she had time and again demonstrated a vigor and ruthlessness in her pursuit of the Empire's enemies that had put even some Moff's to shame.

An attitude, fortunately, which was solidly backed up by competence and cleverness and efficiency. Nothing, in Armand's mind, was more contemptible than a shining-eyed Intelligence agent whom smugglers and Rebels alike could fly casual rings around.

The smug smile faded. Clever and efficient, to be sure. But she was going to need every bit of her skill if she was to pull this one out of the fire.

The door slid open. "You summoned me?" Ysanne said gravely from the doorway.

"Sit down," Armand said in the same tone, feeling another flicker of pride as he gestured her toward a chair. No mention of her being his daughter, with the underlying suggestion or invitation of preferential treatment such an acknowledgment might have implied. In this room, in this building, she was an agent and he was her director, and that was the totality of their relationship. "I have an important job for you."

"How important?" she asked as she lowered herself with sinuous grace into the chair.

"It could be a career-maker for you," he said. "It also could be a career-breaker for a large number of others."

Her eyes flickered, just noticeably. She had the Isard family ambition, too, the same ambition that had taken Armand himself to the top. "Tell me more."

Armand selected a datacard from a stack on his desk. "An eight-card datapack has been taken to Darkknell," he said, sliding the datacard across the desk toward her. "This datapack must at all costs be retrieved."

"Point of origin?"

"The Despayre system," Armand said, watching her face closely.

Once again, the brief flicker of her eyes showed that his long-held suspicion was correct. Despite the most stringent of security procedures, Ysanne had somehow managed to learn about the Death Star project, even to the point of knowing where the massive weapon was being constructed. "So you understand the seriousness of the situation," he went on. "Under the circumstances, I can hardly declare an Empirewide state of emergency and seal the Darkknell system with a ring of Star Destroyers."

"Certainly not for a project that doesn't officially even exist," Ysanne agreed, almost off-handedly. "I presume that also means you're not sending a full Intelligence force with me." Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "Or is there more to it than that? Is this theft somehow personal?"

Armand grimaced. "Personal enough," he conceded. "The suspected thief was given his security clearance by a close associate of mine, a man high up in our department, who will be in serious trouble if we can't retrieve the datapack before the Rebel Alliance gets hold of it. *Or* before someone else in Intelligence does."

Ysanne picked up the datacard. "Is the traitor's file in here?"

"The suspected traitor, yes," Armand said. "Along with several possibilities of who the Rebels might send to pick it up."

Ysanne nodded. "So you want me to retrieve the datapack, confirm the traitor's identity, and capture the Rebel agent. Is that it?"

Armand suppressed a smile. The famous Isard family confidence ... "Or as much of that as you can manage in the time you'll have," he said. "I've ordered an interdiction of Darkknell's spaceports, but I doubt the local authorities will be able to keep them sealed for very long. Just remember that retrieving the datapack is the most important part of the job."

"Then I'd best get started," she said, sliding the datacard into a tunic pocket. "I presume it's all right for me to take one of my enforcers along."

"If you have to," Armand said. "Make sure it's someone you trust, and don't tell him what it is you're actually after."

"Of course not," she said, standing up. "You'll order me a courier ship?"

"It's already standing by," Armand told her. "Good-bye, and good luck."

She favored him with a faint smile. "The Isards make their own luck," she reminded him softly. "I'll be in touch."

# **Interlude at Darkknell**

## **Part Two**

### **by Michael A. Stackpole**

Hal Horn sighed heavily as the Darkknell Defense Agency officer glanced at his identification card, travel permits, and the warrants he had brought with him. It seemed to Hal that every member of the Xakrean bureaucracy had studied those same datafiles with an intensity that suggested they were digitizing the data and loading it straight into their brains. He had come to Darkknell and specifically the city of Xakrea because the local officials' legendary attention to detail and hatred for disorder made them natural allies in his search for Moranda Savich.

*Now I'm not so sure*, he thought. He glanced down at the smaller, slighter man. "I think you'll see, Colonel Nyroska, that all my files are in order. All I really want is for you to issue an alert that will have your people looking for my target if she tries to leave the planet."

Nyroska's dark eyes narrowed. "You realize, of course, Inspector Horn, that you have absolutely no jurisdiction here."



"I do know that, but ..."

"And while we are willing to cooperate with fellow officers of the law, long gone are the days of Jedi vigilantes traveling hither and thither, chasing miscreants and rendering harsh verdicts right then and there. The days of lightsaber justice are no more."

"I understand, Colonel." Hal turned partway to the side, so his height and bulk wouldn't seem to be threatening to the Xakrean. "As per your regulations, I surrendered my blaster when I made planetfall and I have no weapons on me."

"Commendable, Inspector. And I think it good you remain in civilian clothes, so your presence cannot be misconstrued." Nyroska hit a button on his datapad, ejecting the datacard that contained Hal's documents. He toyed with it for a moment, then held it out to the Corellian. "Your quarry, this Savich, she is not a violent criminal? Nothing in her records indicates that she is."

"No, sir. She's just good at liberating valuables from the unwary."

"A lifter, then?"

"One of the best."

Nyroska stood abruptly, his oversized chair sliding back. The chair and the huge desk had helped dwarf Nyroska, but had not needed to work very hard to do so. *He's even smaller than Corran!* Hal catalogued that fact to use the next time his son complained about being short. The Colonel waved his hand toward the door of the office.

Hal blinked. "That's it?"

"We really have nothing else to discuss."

"But what about putting the spaceport inspectors on alert?"

Nyroska gave him an oily smile as he came around from behind the desk and rested a hand on the small of Hal's back. "My dear Inspector Horn, our spaceport inspectors are already on alert. We received a request from Imperial authorities to be on the lookout for Rebel operatives coming here. You witnessed our thoroughness—you fit the profile we were given. As you can imagine, this Imperial matter is consuming much of our time. I

will append this Savich woman's name to the detain list, but unless you can link her to the Rebels, she will be a secondary concern."

Hal closed his eyes for a moment and slowly exhaled. The galaxy had turned upside down in recent years, so much so he hardly recognized it. Imperial authorities had become obsessed with the Rebellion and, while folks with Rebel sympathies could be found all over the place, on Corellia very few Rebel agents had been discovered. He'd heard rumors that Garm Bel Iblis had been connected to the Rebellion, but he considered most of the rumors the normal fallout of politics. *And with Bel Iblis dead, there's no way he can defend himself against such lies.*

Still, those lies had helped brand Hal and every other Corellian as a potential Rebel agent. While the authorities he had come to for help in finding Moranda Savich were checking him out, she could have been dancing onto any number of ships headed for points unknown. Time once was when nabbing someone with her reputation would have made a man like Nyroska jump for joy, but as the Emperor focused more energy on the Rebellion, priorities shifted.

"It would be easy for me to lie to you, Colonel Nyroska, and tell you she is the Rebel agent you're looking for." Hal shook his head slowly. "She isn't—at least, I don't know of any Rebel connections she has."

"Thank you for your honesty, Inspector."

Hal paused in the doorway and arched an eyebrow above a hazel eye at him. "You didn't expect honesty from a Corellian?"

"All I expect of you is respect for our regulations, Inspector." Nyroska shrugged uneasily. "These days I never expect honesty, from anyone."

The Corellian thought for a moment, then nodded. "Have to hope for a return to the old days, then, when those we hunted actually committed crimes. Thanks for your help. I'll let you know when I find her."

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Ysanne Isard glared up at Trabler as her aide finally cleared the Immigration checkpoint. "What detained you?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Profile check, I assume."

She almost snapped that he should not assume anything, but she checked herself. She'd chosen Trabler to accompany her because of his unswerving loyalty to the Empire and because she recalled his wrenching the head off a captive Ithorian with his bare hands. *He is here for his muscle, nothing more. He will do what I tell him to do when I tell him to do it. The blond hair and Corellian background of his cover identity likely did trip the Xakrean profiling system. Their tendency toward being overly thorough will only slow us down, which is why I want no official contact with them.*

"No matter. They're bringing our landspeeder around. You are confident you can navigate?"

Trabler nodded once. "I studied the local maps and always have my datapad to back things up."

"Good." She led the way to the spaceport exit and found a man standing next to a rental landspeeder. He bore a sign that read "Glasc," her assumed surname. She and Trabler made their way over to him, identified themselves, and took possession of the vehicle. As Trabler slipped into the driver's seat, she took her place in the back.

Isard powered up her datapad. "I have the files on Xakrea's fringe population and am getting comlinked updates as the locals flag files. Since the Rebel will undoubtedly be taking refuge among the scum here, we will hunt there as well. Our quarry will want to alter his identity, and there are only a few places that offer such services here. We will begin by checking them."

"As you wish, Special Agent Isard."

"There is one address on East Ryloth Street and another on Palpatine Parkway. Which is closer?"

"Ryloth Street should be." Trabler glanced at her in the mirror. "That would be your preference, then?"

“Indeed.” She smiled coldly at the reflection of his eyes. “Anyone who would sell him a new identity will sell him to us. Let’s go, we have a lot of shopping to do today.”

Hal thanked the hovercab driver and tipped him half-again the fare he’d been charged. “Really, this is it; 24335 East Ryloth Street, right where I want to be.”

The Devaronian looked around at the seedy neighborhood and back at Hal again. “West Ryloth is more your kind of place, my friend.”

Hal shook his head and jerked a thumb at the curio shop. “Arky is an old friend.” He gave the cabbie a conspiratorial wink. “You never saw me, hey?”

“Got it, pal. Never saw you.”

The Corellian exited the cab and slammed the door shut. He watched the cab pull away, then stepped over a midden of litter and made his way straight for the shop’s transparisteel door. The lettering painted on the door proclaimed the shop to be Arky’s Emporium of Forgotten Treasures; Hal figured most of them were forgotten because they had to be excavated from beneath layers of dust. All the items on display in the viewports were sun-faded and cracked, hardly inviting the casual passerby to venture inside.

*Not that they get many casual passersby down here*, Hal thought. He opened the door and quickly scanned the place. The only other customer glanced quickly in his direction when the door buzzed as Hal opened it, then turned and seemed very interested in not letting Hal get a look at his face. That behavior would have struck Hal as odd, but the customer was likely taking his cue from the way Arky had paled when he recognized Hal.

“Seb Arkos, what a surprise.” The Corellian Security Force officer kept his voice light. “Last I recall, you’d won an all-expenses-paid trip to Kessel.”

Seb Arkos snorted. He stood as tall as Hal, but had a skeletally thin build that matched the rheumy grumble that underscored his words. "Yeah, well, glitmining isn't my kind of thing. Out of your range, aren't you, CorSec?"

"I'm hurt, Arky. Here I come all this way to see you, and all I get is hostility." Hal strolled through the store, seeing only a collection of junk. He almost remarked about that fact, but he remembered that his wife had a knack for walking into such a place and rescuing treasures from it. "Dealing in antiques *is* your sort of thing now, or are those delicate hands still forging the best transport and identification documents in the galaxy?"

Arky's smile betrayed him for a second, then he scowled. "I keep my nose clean."

Hal raised opened hands. "Hey, the local snoopers are no friends of mine."

"But you are looking for a friend?"

"Someone I feel about the same way I feel about you, Arky." Hal slipped a static holograph of Moranda Savich from his pocket and flashed it for the forger. "Moranda Savich. Seen her?"

"Moranda Savich?" The slender man tapped a bony finger against his chin. "Moranda Savich?"

Hal jerked a thumb at the store's other customer. "You want me to start asking your clientele?"

Arky's eyes widened, the pale blue communicating a jolt of fear. "No, no need to do that. I seen her around, you know, places."

"She retaining your services?"

The forger shook his head. "Nope, she hasn't asked me to dummy anything up for her."

Hal caught a hint of deceit from the shopkeeper. "Let's not try to slice the truth too thin here. She's talked to you about smuggling her off this rock, right? And you figured you'd nail her for clean datadocs in the process?"

The cadaverous man's eyes narrowed, and a lank of white hair drifted down over his forehead. "Okay, straight bytes, no bits

flipped. We talked. She wants to be gone, and you're the reason. She's getting very insistent."

"And you're going to let me know when you're meeting with her next?"

Arky's head came up. "Look, Horn, you know I don't play that way. You set me up to join Booster and the others on Kessel, but I didn't Vader them out, did I? I was loyal to my mates."

Hal shrugged and folded his arms across his chest. "Fine. I can wait here forever. We'll be business partners, you and I. I'll be your silent partner, checking everyone out, at least until you decide not to be silent."

Arky glowered at him, then swiped a hand under his nose. "Okay, maybe she was going to be around. Soon, maybe."

The CorSec inspector nodded. "Good enough. I can wait."

"Outside, hey?"

Hal glanced from Arky to the other man in the store, then saw a woman approaching the door. "Sure. Looks like it will be crowded in here soon anyway. I'll wait outside. She won't see me and will never know it was you."

Across the street, hidden in the shadows of an alley, Moranda Savich smacked an open hand against the wall. Seb Arkos had been the only shadow broker who had been willing to talk with her. The Imperial interdiction had scared everyone else. *Of course, you don't have to be a genius to know a Corellian expatriate wouldn't be smart enough to be afraid of the Imps.* The local authorities were ruled and regged up so badly they had to fill out Kbytes of dataforms before they could even draw a blaster. *Not so the Imps—rumor has it they get bonus pay for saving the state the cost of a trial.*

She wanted to get off Xakrea as fast as possible, and meeting Seb Arkos the previous evening had seemed a fine stroke of luck—*luck which has soured.* As she headed toward his store to make her arrangements, who should pop out of a hovercab but Hal Horn, as big as life and too damned close for her comfort.

*Closest he's gotten so far. A minute later and he would have caught me in that shop.* She allowed herself a half smile. *Well, not all my luck is bad.*

It hadn't taken Moranda long to put together a few puzzle pieces as events unfolded on Xakrea. She'd used her datapad to take a look at the cards she'd lifted, but they were encrypted. While she was no ace slicer, she knew a few tricks and was able to determine that the files had been coded with some heavy-duty Imperial encryption routines. Given the eight cards in the set, she figured they had to be some fairly extensive military files—military files being the only thing that matched up with the courier's demeanor. The only folks who would want Imp military files would be the Empire's enemies, which meant the Rebellion. The Imperial interdict on the spaceport had a search for Rebels linked to it, confirming her suspicions.

This gave her a brand-new problem, and one that made Hal Horn a decided side issue. Moranda had heard rumors about the Rebellion, passed some on, and marveled at others, but by and large she kept away from being involved. In her line of work the face on the coin really didn't matter much, just the fact that the coin was there and could be lifted. Any government would take a dim view of how she made her living, be it Imperial, local, or whatever these Rebels would put into place. *Those folks worry about laws, where I worry about evading them.*

Having a datapack chock full of Imperial military secrets could easily be construed by local and Imperial forces as a sign that she was a Rebel. She had no idea if the rumors of what the Imps did with captured Rebels were true or not, but she'd prefer an extended stay on Kessel to what she'd heard about. Keeping the datapack was not a good idea, and she knew it. And, she kept telling herself, she was going to ditch it at the earliest opportunity.

And yet there its weight was, in her jacket pocket, slapping against her hip as she crouched down. Someone, she knew, would pay good money for the cards, and that money would take

her places Hal Horn couldn't even begin to dream about finding her. She didn't see hanging on to the datacards as a gamble as much as she did a balance. Right now the risk wasn't too great, but when things got unbalanced, she could ditch the datacards.

*Right, that's what I'm going to do.*

Her self-mocking smile died as a woman got out of a landspeeder farther up the block. The front registration plate had a rental code on it and looked far too new to be in this part of Xakrea unless it was driven by a booster looking to piece it out for parts. The woman spoke to the driver, then set off down the street, heading for Arky's store.

Though the woman wore civilian clothes, Moranda knew she was Imperial, straight from Imperial Center, and that meant she was most probably Imperial Intelligence. The cut of her clothes marked her point of origin, and the haughty way her chin lifted as she navigated past a derelict glitbiter lying up against a building marked her as Imperial. *And she's going straight for Arky, which means Intel, and that means I'm in very deep.*

Ysanne Isard wrinkled her nose at the store's thick scent. She ran a finger across a feline statue carved from Ithorian *toal* wood, then gently brushed her hands against each other to rid her finger of dust. As she did so, she took quick stock of the store and the three men in it. Seb Arkos she recognized from a file on her datapad. The other two men seemed unremarkable until the larger one speaking with Arkos glanced at her.

*Horn, from Corellia. CorSec, if the file flashed to me was accurate.* It struck her as odd that a man newly arrived on Xakrea would come so quickly to a known Rebel contact point. *Unless, like Bel Iblis, he's a Rebel, too.* She frowned. Nothing in Horn's file indicated any Rebel sympathies, and Isard dimly recalled his father being a highly placed member of CorSec, one who had been lauded for his diligence in hunting Jedi.



She turned to examine a filthy Weequay chin-harp, knowing full well it could never function without the matching chord hammer, and raised her comlink to her mouth. In a whisper she commanded Trabler to bring the landspeeder up to the store's door. Through the window she caught a hint of movement as he complied with her order, so she pocketed the comlink and walked smartly over to Hal Horn.

"Inspector Horn? I am Katya Glasc of Darkknell Special Security."

A grin blossomed on Arkos's face. "In trouble, Inspector?"

Horn shook his head. "I shouldn't be. Am I, Agent Glasc?"

Though slightly shorter than Trabler, Horn had a powerful build and a metric ton more intelligence in his hazel eyes than Trabler could ever hope for. He wore his brown hair cut conservatively short, and that revealed the gray hairs growing in at his temples. She guessed he was a half-dozen years older than she was, and someone who saw himself as a good man. *Which means he can be useful or very dangerous.*

"That depends. Your identification, please."

Horn carefully drew a datacard from within his jacket, which Isard slipped into her datapad. She glanced at his information and took in the warrants, then nodded and returned the card to him. "I wanted to make certain. Please, forgive the caution. Your investigation, we may have a break in it ..."

Her head came up, then she frowned. "Perhaps this is not the place to discuss this sort of thing. If you don't mind, I have a speeder waiting outside ..."

Horn watched her carefully. "You've found Savich?"

"We've found evidence of her presence. I would feel more at ease explaining outside." She hooked a hand through his left elbow, letting it rest lightly enough there to be construed as an invitation, not an order.

The Corellian nodded slowly. "Your world, your rules." He turned back and pointed a finger at the shopkeeper. "Don't let me down, Arky."

“Right, Horn.” The thin man scoffed loudly. “I’ll have her wait right here for you. You bet.”

Garm Bel Iblis suppressed a shudder as Isard led Hal Horn out of the shop. Bel Iblis had been so careful in reaching Arkos’s store that when Horn walked in, he felt certain he’d been trapped. Arkos had recognized the inspector right off and had muttered, “Emperor’s black bones, CorSec, here,” under his breath. Bel Iblis had braced himself not to jump when Horn grabbed him, but the man had just passed him by without so much as a glance.

As Horn started in on Arkos, Bel Iblis had begun to relax. He still had no evidence that anyone was looking for him, or that anyone thought he still lived. The anonymity of death gave him a chance to operate without surveillance, but how long it would last he had no idea. He hoped Arkos would provide him with a good set of documents to allow him to continue his search for the thief on Darkknell and, possibly, even act as a broker for any exchange.

It struck Bel Iblis as possible that Horn could be a Rebel operative sent to Darkknell by Bail Organa and Mon Mothma to recover the datapack, since neither of them knew he was alive and out to get it himself. He had no idea if Horn was a Rebel; Bel Iblis admired the efficient cell system that had been set up to deny all but those who needed to know that sort of information. He hesitated, almost prepared to make his identity known to Horn, but the direction of the CorSec agent’s questioning of Arkos made him hold back.

The Senator found himself secretly smiling as Horn worked on Arkos. One of the most galling things about being a senator from Corellia was dealing with the reputation his system had for its smugglers. Bel Iblis and the majority of the other Corellians were good people, but they were judged by association with others. While Bel Iblis didn’t know Hal Horn, he knew plenty of

folks like him, who worked hard to make Corellia a better place. His admiration for Horn's dedication to duty spawned his smile.

The arrival of Ysanne Isard killed that smile again. Bel Iblis had only ever met her once, at an Imperial reception. She had been on her father's arm. Bel Iblis detested Armand Isard. A little man with iron eyes and a wiry speed that made Bel Iblis feel clumsy, Armand Isard had ruthlessly ferreted out and destroyed Rebel cells, both real and imagined. His daughter, with her mismatched eyes of fire and ice, had inherited her father's singleness of purpose and, worse yet, had developed a personal devotion to the Emperor. For her to be on Darkkneel meant the original theft had been discovered and that Armand Isard was sparing no effort in getting the datapack back in Imperial hands.

A cold chill sank into the Senator's bones as he realized Armand Isard had undoubtedly given the order that slew his family and almost got him. His hands closed into fists, but he didn't lash out; he didn't smash Ysanne Isard in the face with all his might, though he sorely wanted to. *No, even killing her would not hurt her father, and even hurting him is not the focus here. The datapack she's hunting for, that will help bring down the Empire. If we do that, never again will there be a place for an Armand Isard or Emperor to hurt people.*

Gaining control of his anger, Bel Iblis turned to watch the door close behind Isard and Horn. "Well, Arkos, the time we have to complete our business is slipping away. I think we should conclude it before the Emperor himself comes wandering in, don't you?"

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Moranda Savich saw the landspeeder cruise down and come to a stop in front of the store and felt as if a hand were tightening around her heart. She'd spent a lot of time doing her best to avoid Imperial scrutiny, but that didn't mean she allowed herself to be ignorant of her enemies. Imperial Intelligence ops, as a rule, cast a wide web when going after a target. The fact that she could

see the spider in the center of that web meant that other forces were closing in.

*And that means I get caught holding a prize morsel.* Again the urge to throw the datapack away nearly overwhelmed her. She reached into her pocket to get it, then noticed the landspeeder's driver's-side window sliding down into the door. The bruiser of a driver glanced around, then looked at himself in the rearview mirror. His vanity, which struck her as very human, brought her out of her panic and sparked a plan.

She pulled the datapack out of her pocket, broke it open, and pulled out the eight datacards. She stacked them one on top of another and laid them against the bottom of her datapad. Straightening up, she tugged her jacket into place, then boldly strode over toward the landspeeder. She consulted the map on her datapad a couple of times, looked around, and let a puzzled expression contort her brow.

She'd closed to within three meters before the driver noticed her, and by then she was flashing her datapad at him. "Excuse me, please. I believe I'm lost. Can you help me, please?"

The man's expression eased. "Yeah, I guess maybe I could."

Moranda leaned over and smiled broadly at him. She took the datapad from her left hand into her right and thrust it into the vehicle, stabbing toward the datapad he had mounted in the dashboard holder. "Our maps look different."

The driver studied her map, then his own, taking her datapad into his hands to do so. Moranda crossed her arms and let the datacards in her left hand slip, one by one, down into the window well of the landspeeder's door. She coughed lightly to cover the minute clicks as they descended, and was pretty certain that the driver would take any sounds he heard to be key clicks from the datapad.

The driver handed her back her datapad. "See, this is *East* Ryloth Street. Your map was showing *West* Ryloth Street. You were five kilometers off, that's why you couldn't tell where you were."

“Oh, thank you very much.” Moranda studied the datapad, then shook her head and smiled. “I can’t tell you what a big help you’ve been.” She backed away from the vehicle and headed off the way she had come, valiantly resisting the urge to burst out laughing. *The prize he came here for is now ten centimeters from him and he has no clue.*

Unable to help herself, Moranda spun around in midstreet, thinking to thank the man again. As she came around, she looked up and locked eyes with Hal Horn.

Seeing Moranda Savich there, in the middle of the street, capering around in a circle like a child, sent a jolt through Hal Horn. He started to move after her, but the Darkknell Security woman’s hand became a claw on his arm. Moranda had already turned and begun to run when Hal looked at his escort. “She’s getting away.”

“Trabler,” the woman snapped, “get her.”

The driver’s door on the landspeeder in front of the store opened and a huge man piled out. Hal knew he was huge not only because he towered over the roof of the landspeeder, but his massive paw dwarfed the blaster he drew from beneath his jacket. Hal recognized it as a Luxan Penetrator, favored by many because of its concealability and the serious power it packed. Most models didn’t even have a stun setting and that, combined with a cool sense of lethality rippling off the man, prompted Hal to act.

He took a second to focus, then used a trick his father had taught him long ago, before the Clone Wars and before the Jedi hunters had come. He pushed his consciousness into Trabler’s mind. He saw through Trabler’s eyes, watching the Penetrator come up and center itself on Moranda Savich’s back. He watched Trabler track her for a second and knew she’d never reach the safety of the alley in time.

Drawing on the Force within himself, he projected a blurred image of Moranda into Trabler's mind.

Trabler's finger tightened on the trigger. A red-gold beam stabbed out and caught Moranda in the shoulder just as she reached the alley. Hal heard her scream and watched her tumble down into a pile of debris. He started to go after her, but Isard held on to him again.

Hal batted her arm away. "What are you doing? She's down, either dead or seriously wounded. I need to check."

The woman's eyes narrowed and though their color did not match, the venom in them did. "We will have the locals find her and bring her to the morgue. We have more important business to attend to."

Hal frowned, wishing he could get a solid read off the woman. His use of the Force had left him a bit drained—it had been far too long since he had done anything that active, and he was grossly out of practice. As a result, he couldn't even get the menace that had to be roaring off Trabler as the man turned and aimed his blaster at Hal. "What's going on here?"

Glasc's face tightened. "I couldn't tell you in there, but we have a Rebel operative on the loose and I need your help in tracking him."

"Look, you got me out here saying you were helping me with my case, and now your man has killed my suspect. I'm not here to hunt Rebels."

Her chin came up. "But you are loyal to the Empire, are you not?"

"I serve CorSec to maintain order, so, yes, I'm loyal to the Empire."

She let her expression soften and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "There are members of Darkknell Special Security who are not, which is why my search is running into trouble. I have to rely on someone from outside my own service—you—to make some headway. I know this is

unorthodox, but surely you've resorted to unusual methods to push cases forward before."

"Some, but I don't see that this is any concern of mine, really." Hal shook his head. "My purpose for being here is lying in a heap over there."

"So it might seem, but the Rebel we're after was involved in the assassination of Senator Garm Bel Iblis and his family." The woman's voice became very solemn. "The speech he was to give that night was one in which he was going to denounce the Rebellion. They murdered him so that wouldn't happen. I thought that you, a Corellian, might want to help us find his killer."

Hal shivered and felt his flesh puckering. As much as he couldn't believe the casual way Trabler had shot Moranda—nothing in her file warranted death as a punishment—the idea of a bomber who killed hundreds of people just to get one man filled him with revulsion. *If Bel Iblis's assassin is here, he must be found and brought to justice. Bel Iblis was from Corellia. I owe it to him to help find his killer.*

The CorSec inspector nodded. "Okay, I'm in." He leveled a finger at Trabler. "Just no shooting first, okay? If your suspect murdered Bel Iblis, we want him to talk and lead us back to the others involved in the Rebellion, right?"

Glasc nodded, then opened the landspeeder's rear door. "After you, Inspector Horn. With your help, our quarry won't get away."

As the landspeeder sped off, Bel Iblis stumbled from the shop and ran across the street. He'd seen the woman's senseless murder and though he would not have questioned the truth of someone reporting Ysanne Isard had ordered such a thing, to see it unfold before him was another thing entirely. Reaching the alley mouth he saw blood and, just for a moment, he expected to follow the trail and find his wife at the end of it.

*No, she's gone. Poor Arrianya, you died for a cause you didn't even believe in.* Bel Iblis choked back the lump rising in his throat, then looked deeper into the dim alley and saw the woman slumped against a wall. Her right arm hung limply at her side, the sleeve of her coat soaked in blood. A cigarra hung from the corner of her mouth, and she kept trying to strike a lighter with her blood-slicked left hand.

The woman looked over at him and grinned. "Got a spark, pal?" Then her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed.

The senator ran to her and knelt at her side. *The only virtue of being shot with a Penetrator is that the tiny beam makes a neat hole.* Bel Iblis saw a nasty entry wound and a smaller exit on the front side of her shoulder. He stripped off his own coat and wrapped it around the wounds, then lifted her in his arms and started back toward Arkos's store.

It occurred to him that the last woman he had carried in his arms like this had been his wife, on an anniversary getaway several years earlier. It had been a wonderful time, an escape from the pressures of his office and her duties, and they had both told each other that they would do it again, soon. *Very soon.*

Bel Iblis's expression hardened. *I lost her to the Empire; I'm not losing anyone else.* He knew, given the course the Rebellion would likely take, that resolution would never hold. *Well, at least I won't lose this woman. It's not saving the galaxy, but it's saving the part of it I can, and that works for now.*

He looked up as Arkos held the shop's door open. "We need to get her some medical help—now. That woman was Ysanne Isard, late of Imperial Center and employed by Imperial Intelligence."

"If she's here ..." Terror choked off Arkos's voice.

The senator put steel into his voice. "Hang with me, Arkos. She's not invincible—she walked right past me, remember, and snagged someone who's got nothing to do with our business. Keep your head and we'll all keep ours."



Arkos thought for a moment, then nodded quickly. "You're right. Thanks."

"Not a problem. Let's get things going," Bel Iblis smiled. "There will come a point when Isard realizes she needs to come back here and complete her business with you. By then I want everything we need to do done, and the only thing left for her here is our laughter at her blunder."

# Interlude at Darkknell

## Part Three

### by Michael A. Stackpole

Hal Horn's afternoon sojourn with Agent Glasc and her aide, Trabler, made one thing abundantly clear to him. These two, as efficient as they might be as investigators, were not part of Darkknell Special Security, not even whatever they might call their internal investigations bureau. *They have all the arrogance I'd expect from the Isk-isk division, but it's usually only displayed to Huttled-up cops, not civilians.*

Glasc had moved Hal from location to location, proclaiming each to be a suspected Rebel contact site. Most were sleazy little holes like Arky's store, but a couple had been more upscale and toward the west side of Xakrea. The gourmet caf shop where Hal and Trabler waited outside on either side of the door was one of the more prosperous places. Hal had enjoyed the rich aroma of the small shop, and had reluctantly agreed to wait outside as the owner took Glasc into her private office to discuss things.

Hal arched an eyebrow at Trabler. "Hard to believe the owner didn't think we'd fit in with the clientele."

The bigger man frowned, causing his blond brows to kiss each other above his nose. "You think we look like Rebels?"

Hostility poured through Trabler's voice and Hal was perfectly glad his Force senses were a bit tired, since it saved him the full force of the anger rolling off the guy. "Easy, my friend, I didn't mean to suggest that at all. You know as well as I do that the Rebel tag on this place was likely snatched by the other caf shop around the corner. Customers here seem a bit too prosperous to be Rebels."

"Think so, do you?" Trabler snorted coldly. "You'd be surprised at how highly some Rebels are placed. Then again, maybe you wouldn't."

"And that's supposed to mean?"

"Means one can't be too sure who's gone over or not." Trabler half smiled. "The Core Worlds have their share of Rebels, sure, but rimkin have more."

"Interesting point." Hal let a pair of women exiting the shop shield him from Trabler. The last time Hal had heard the word "rimkin" used, he had broken up a fight in a Corellian tapcafe where a local had beaten someone from Imperial Center to a pulp for applying such an insulting term to him. *Not too many rim-dwellers apply that word to themselves.*

The door opened again and Agent Glasc appeared. She was daubing a white handkerchief against a dark spot on her gray blouse. "She was useless. Broke down and blubbered about evading taxes, but she knows nothing about the Rebellion. Or the plot against Bel Iblis."

Trabler glanced at his datapad, then pointed on down the street. "Continuum Void is next on the list. It's that way."

Hal took the lead and found Glasc quickly pacing beside him. "The owner didn't react to any of the holographs you showed her?"

Glasc shook her head. “Ignorant, completely ignorant, as was her staff. Places like this claim to bring the latest in Imperial culture to Darkkneel, but it’s only what they imagine really goes on at the heart of the Empire. I mean, Corellia is a Core World—did you think the Corellian blend caf was the sort of thing you’d drink at home?”

“Well, no, but that’s because at CorSec we brew it strong enough to be used for medicinal purposes.” Hal shrugged. “When doing a rimstint I try not to let the indigs and their ways get to me, you know?”

“You’re very charitable, Inspector Horn.”

Hal smiled. “I try to be.” The fact that Glasc didn’t react at all when he referred to the citizens of Darkkneel as “indigs” or his time on the world as a “rimstint,” told him very clearly she wasn’t the local she was purporting to be. *A local could no more have failed to react than Moranda could give up her cigarras. Something is not right here, and I’m not looking forward to finding out how wrong it’s become.*

Trabler moved ahead and opened the door to the crowded tapcaf. Hal descended the trio of steps to the serving floor, then worked his way around past a table of boisterous Devaronians. He wanted to reach the bar before Glasc did. He managed to delay her by tapping a Devaronian on the shoulder. As the man swung his head around to see who had touched him, a horn snagged Glasc’s uniform tunic, slowing her down.

Hal spotted a small man wearing a name tag that proclaimed him to be the manager and moved to intercept him before the guy could head through a doorway leading into an office marked “Private.” “I’m Inspector Horn; these are Agents Glasc and Trabler. We have some questions for you. Do you want to answer them now, or *after* we lock this place down and have it searched for contraband?”

The little man gulped air audibly, and coughed half of it back up. “I don’t want trouble.”

Hal half turned toward Glasc. Her glare had only been partially melted by the way he’d braced the man. “Agent Glasc here has

some holographs for you to look at.” Hal held his hand out, and she gave them to him, then he fanned them in front of the manager. “Recognize anyone?”

The man gave them a cursory glance. “No, I don’t think I do.”

Hal settled his left hand on the man’s right shoulder. “Look, pal, I’m just trying to give you a chance to help yourself here. The surveillance team we’ve got on this place has pointed out to us which of these guys has actually been through here. Now you confirm their information and answer more questions, or we send you away for obstructing justice. We can still send him to Kessel for that, right, Agent Glasc?”

Glasc nodded, her expression getting cold. “For a long time.”

The little man shivered. “Kessel? I don’t even know what that is.”

“And that’s the way you want to keep it, friend. Look at the holographs again, closely.”

The man did, running a finger across the surface of each. The manager didn’t let recognition flash through his eyes on any of them. Even so, with his hand on the man’s shoulder, Hal could feel the tiny twitches of shoulder muscle that marked each pause over an image. Three of the five guys had actually been in the place, but the longest pause had come over the center picture, the one of the short blond guy with a military-style haircut.

The manager blinked. “I’m not sure.”

“Let me help you.” Hal shuffled the blond’s picture to the top of the pack, then plucked it off the top and smacked it against the man’s forehead. He did so with a bit more gusto than he wanted to, but the fact that the man’s head bumped against the wall eased Glasc’s scowl and, after all, Hal was playing more to appease her than anything else.

“This guy was in here and you remember him. How recently?”

“Um, um, yesterday maybe, no, wait, this morning. Early. Only the habitués in that early, you know?” The manager aped Hal’s growing smile. “He was waiting for someone, but then he burst into flames.”

Glasc pounced on that remark. "Burst into flames?"

The manager winced at the sharp tone in her voice. "Well, he was sitting there, then this woman with a drink and cigarra tripped and spilled the drink on him. Cigarra caught it on fire, I guess. She helped him put it out and he was okay."

Hal gave the man's shoulder a squeeze. "Great, and what else do you remember?"

"Well, when the guy he was waiting for showed, they talked and the blond guy there, he got agitated. He said he'd been robbed, then he took off like he'd stolen Vader's cloak, you know?"

Glasc narrowed her eyes and glanced at Hal. "Whatever he had was lifted, you figure? The woman who set him on fire must have it. What did she look like?"

The pink tip of the manager's tongue wormed its way over dry lips. "Well, she wasn't that tall, and she had brown hair..."

Hal shook his head. "This is ridiculous. I have a holograph for you to look at." He reached into his pocket and slipped a holograph from his wallet, then pulled it out. He ripped the blond man's holograph from the manager's forehead and tossed it to Glasc, then showed the other holo to the manager. "Was this her?"

The manager shook his head. "Never seen her before in my life."

*I should hope not. My wife wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this.* Hal shrugged and slipped the holograph back into his pocket. "Thank you for your help. You're free to go."

The man scurried off as Glasc grabbed Hal's shoulder and spun him toward her. "What do you mean dismissing him?"

"Forgive me for preempting your investigation, but you know this lead was a complete bust. We're looking for the person who killed Bel Iblis, right? Well, what assassin sits around in some dump tapcaf like a jewel thief waiting for a fence? I've no doubt your pretty boy there is guilty of something, but he was a rank amateur if he got lifted the way he did. And a lifter that good has

likely already put plenty of hyperspace between her butt and this rock.”

Trabler frowned. “The assassin was waiting to get paid.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Then what was lifted? Proof he’d killed Bel Iblis? I would have thought the galaxywide broadcast of the state funeral on Corellia would have pretty much been taken as proof. Moreover, an assassin that good would have demanded at least partial payment up front, so he’d never have to dive to these depths again. We should be looking on some luxury resort world, not here.”

Hal watched Glasc and saw her eyes flicker back and forth for a moment. He expected panic to roll off her, but he caught none of it. *Which means my Force reserves are absolutely gone, or she’s just that good at self-control.* Her whole cover story, thought up on the fly as Trabler shot Moranda down, was falling apart, and Trabler’s spackle job had only pointed out how absurd it had been from the start. Whatever they were really here searching for had been brought to Darkknell by the blond and lifted by Moranda. The fact that these two reeked of Core World arrogance suggested to Hal that they were most likely Imperials.

Hal shook his head. *And that means both Moranda—if she’s even alive—and I are in far deeper than we ever wanted to be.*

Garm Bel Iblis looked around the threadbare apartment as Moranda gingerly shrugged on a new blouse and jacket. Her living quarters were little more than a box with a window and a small refresher station walled away toward the rear, right beside the closet in which she rooted about for clothes. He didn’t see much there that made him think this was a place she’d lived long-term—and before congratulating himself on his deductive ability, he did recall that a CorSec inspector had come looking for her, which meant she’d been on the run.

The room, he thus decided, was one of those places that was the underworld’s equivalent of a safe house. Governments used

safe houses as places where they could hide a witness before a trial or house a spy during debriefing. There were little bits and pieces of stuff here—mismatched glowlamps, a half-dozen periodical datacards, a melange of sheets and blankets that covered a thin pad laid down out of sight of the window—that had probably been left behind by previous criminal tenants.

*Now that I'm full into the Rebellion, I guess this will be the sort of place I'll be spending my time in, too.*

"The place isn't much, I know. Neither am I." Moranda emerged from the closet wearing a vibrant blue tunic and a dark brown coat over it. She eased her right shoulder around in a tiny circle and almost totally suppressed the grimace that resulted. "There, good as new."

"A bacta bath would make you good as new."

"True, but the shot mostly just roasted meat—lots of aches but no breaks. Besides those Emdee droids have a nasty habit of reporting blaster burns to the authorities." Moranda eyed him closely. "Seeing as how you're a Rebel, I don't think you'd want that sort of scrutiny."

Bel Iblis stiffened, quite involuntarily, then narrowed his eyes. "How did you guess?"

"No guess about it." She tapped a finger against her temple. "First, you cared to come find me, and it wasn't to pick over my bones. Compassion is rare these days and the Rebels seem to have a lock on it. Second, you came even though you were smart enough to know the folks who shot me were probably Imperial Intelligence."

Bel Iblis nodded. "The woman was Ysanne Isard, Armand Isard's daughter."

Moranda's eyes grew wide at that, then she shivered. "I knew this was tricky business, but just how tricky ..."

"What else made you think I'm a Rebel?"

"Arky has a rep. You're clearly a Corellian and *all* Corellians hate taking orders. The patch job you did on me suggests you've done your time in the military, which helps breed loyalty to the



way it was before Palpatine got greedy. Finally, if the Imps are sniffing around for something, the folks opposing them are likely to be Rebels.”

“Really?” Bel Iblis let the question linger for a moment. “Perhaps I’m Black Sun.”

“Ha! There’s that compassion thing, remember?”

“Hmmm, good point.” Bel Iblis thought for a moment. “What makes you think the Imps are sniffing around for some *thing* and not some *one*?”

“Well, I could tell you I deduced that from the fact that Iceheart’s daughter is here. For wet work they’d just send out a bunch of her drivers. She’s presumably got brains, so they must want to ask questions before they shoot.”

“Save in your case.”

“Hey, that’s a better shot than he got in.” Moranda gave Bel Iblis a lopsided smile. “Fact is, I lifted something from a nervous young man here and it has Imperial property—*important* Imperial property—coded all over it. That was what you were sent to pick up, wasn’t it?”

Bel Iblis shrugged as casually as he could manage. “Can you prove you were the thief?”

She nodded and pulled a black scarf from the pocket of her jacket. “The packet I exchanged for the one I stole had the mate of this tying it up all nice and pretty. Recognize it?”

He reached out and ran a thumb over the material. “Where’s the package now?”

She laughed. “Not so fast, Reb. I’m grateful for the patch on my arm, but I’d like the resources to leave this mudball and get far away from Hal Horn. What’s it worth to you?”

“Twenty-five thousand credits.”

“How about fifty?”

“Sold.”

Moranda’s eyes widened again. “That valuable, eh? Can we work some bonus pay in here, too?”

“Where is it?”

She hissed and Bel Iblis felt his heart tighten. “In a very safe place.”

“And that would be?”

“The reason I want to know about bonus pay.” She shook her head. “I slipped the datacards into the door of Isard’s rental speeder. I can see that surprises you, but don’t worry. Challenges like that, they always bring out the best in me.”

Hal sat alone in the back of the speeder as Glasc drove them to her operational center. Back at the Continuum Void she’d pulled Trabler aside and given him orders that sent him off on his own. She told Hal that Trabler was going to head to the spaceport to check on how things were running there, but he doubted she was telling the truth. Any information Trabler could learn in person could just as easily have been given to her over a comlink.

Hal paid little attention to the world passing in a blurred palette outside the speeder’s viewports. He found himself wondering what had prompted him to show the tapcafe’s day manager the holo of his wife instead of Moranda’s holo. *I recognized Moranda from the description the second he started in on it—the cigarra used to roast the blond was a giveaway—but why did I protect her? Now I know she’s involved, and that kills the assassin story dead. We have a simple lift from a thief here, but the presence of Imps suggests it’s not that simple at all.*

By not showing the man the correct holo, Hal had killed the only solid investigative lead Glasc had. He assumed, because she was an Imp, and because she questioned his loyalty right up front, the quarry she was after was connected to the Rebellion somehow. Hal Horn had no love for the Rebels—they put themselves on the wrong side of the law and that was enough to earn his opposition—but he wasn’t much crazier about the Imps. More than once he’d tried to rein in the excesses of overzealous Imperial operatives, which generally resulted in his having to clean up after them.

Trabler's actions were a perfect example of the sort of excesses he wanted to avoid. He could have easily run after Moranda and grabbed her. Instead he gave no warning, he just drew his blaster and shot. Hal hoped his messing with Trabler's aim prevented Moranda's death, but he pretty much assumed she was either dead, dying, or severely incapacitated.

Trabler's willingness to shoot to kill someone who, while not innocent, clearly was a bystander in the whole situation, told Hal that the Empire wasn't looking to take any prisoners. Whatever Moranda had lifted had to be very important—covering state secrets, no doubt. *And if I know that much, I have to assume my life may be forfeit at some point—whenever I've exceeded my usefulness, or I become enough of an annoyance.*

That realization didn't bring with it panic. Yes, Hal felt worried and hated the idea of never seeing his wife or son again, but a sense of calm overrode his emotions. He remembered back to when he was very young, not more than six, and had thrown a temper tantrum over a toy that had been broken. His father took him back out into the yard and told him that he couldn't let his emotions run wild that way, that it disturbed the universe. His father began to teach him simple exercises to calm himself and drilled Hal until they became second nature.

Calm, he could think, and he did so as Glasc slid the speeder to a halt before the door of a small house. Shrubbery screened it from the other nearby houses. An alley ran up the left side and seemed to connect via a gate to an alley or street at the back of the property. The place immediately registered to Hal as a safe house, and while he could imagine someone with Darkknell Special Security using one for her headquarters, the isolated nature of the building—despite its being in the city—made him uneasy.

Glasc unlocked the door and entered first, then shut the door and headed down a narrow corridor through the kitchen toward an extension that jutted out from the rear of the house. "This way; my office is back here."

Hal followed closely on her heels. She turned to say something to him as they moved into the kitchen, but her attempt to rivet his attention to her did not completely work. A half second before Trabler emerged from behind a door and dropped his hands on the back of Hal's neck, Hal sensed his presence and acted.

Hal fell to his knees and curled his body forward, forcing Trabler to bend over to maintain his grip. As the Imperial op tightened his hands, Hal straightened up and came up on one knee. He drove the back of his head into Trabler's face, producing all sorts of snapping sounds that he was pretty sure were not his skull. Trabler yelped and released him, raising his hands to cover his shattered face. Hal twisted to the right, scything his right leg back through Trabler's ankles. The big man staggered, overturning a table, then crashed down.

Hal snaked a hand inside Trabler's jacket and drew the guard's Luxan Penetrator. He snapped the safety switch off with his thumb and triggered a quick shot at Glasc. She ducked back with blaster in hand, firing a shot that shattered a plate on a shelf just past Hal's head. Hal dove to his right and came up in a crouch. Behind him Trabler, whose face was a mask of blood, had drawn a vibroblade from his boot and was scrambling to his feet. Hal drilled him dead center, burning out his heart, then ducked back where the food storage unit could give him cover.

Glasc triggered a shot that punched through the storage unit. "That won't protect you."

"Didn't figure it would." Hal fished the holo of Moranda from his pocket and tossed it into the middle of the floor. He let Glasc see it, then he fired a shot that melted it into a burning black bubble. "That will."

"What are you talking about?"

"You Intel types always think you're on top of the game, but I make my living sorting truth from lies, and I've sorted enough here to know that you're here looking for something a Rebel op

stole. He was the blond, and a lifter took whatever he was carrying. She has it now, and that was the holo of her.”

“And you think that because you’ve destroyed that holo that I’ll have to keep you alive to identify her?” Glasc’s laughter filled the kitchen. “The warrants you brought here to Darkknell for her arrest will yield another holo of her.” She punctuated her comment with another shot that spattered hot metal over Hal’s jacket.

“Moranda Savich is a master of disguise, so you won’t find her. More important, though, your man Trabler probably killed her. I’d guess that part of the task you sent him off on was to find out if the local police or hospitals had reported her being recovered, right? They didn’t, which means she’s out there and probably has help.”

“And this will keep you alive why?”

“Because I know her. I’ve tracked her across a half-dozen worlds. I know how she operates; I know what she looks like in myriad disguises. Without me you’ll never find her—or, if you do, it won’t be in *time*.” He stressed the last word to put pressure on the agent, since the desperate measures already employed told him time was of the essence in the recovery of whatever Moranda had stolen. “Give her a chance to catch her breath, and she’ll have the prize sold to the Rebels.”

“I don’t know that I can trust you to help me.”

“Ah, excuse me, but I’m the one here who has trust problems, given that your aide tried to tear my head off.” Hal shook his head. *Pare-Imp-noia! Just never seems to stop.* “Believe it or not, I actually *want* to catch Moranda. You’re my best bet for doing that. The alternative is for me to shoot you dead and hope I can evade an Imperial murder warrant. I help you, you say Trabler’s weapon discharged accidentally, and we’re both in the clear.”

“You’re right, of course. You could never escape a warrant for my murder.” A very confident note entered her voice and sent chills down Hal’s spine. “I am Ysanne Isard, the daughter of the

director of Imperial Intelligence. You would be hunted forever and your family would disappear.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Hal sighed as quietly as he could. *It couldn't get much worse, could it?*

“And you are correct. I am here hunting a Rebel courier. He stole ...”

“Don't tell me; I don't want to know. If you told me you'd have to kill me.” Hal closed his eyes for a moment. “I'm here to catch a thief, and that thief has your property. I get her, you get it, I don't need to know what it is.”

“Very good, very smart of you.” She hesitated for a moment and Hal wanted to cringe for reasons he could not identify. “I am almost inclined to trust you, but because I don't have a full security profile on you, I will demand one condition to our alliance.”

“That being?”

A thin, black, ribbonlike device rolled across the floor and unfolded as it came to rest on its side. It looked like a tiny belt with a black clasp, and Hal recognized it immediately as choke-collar. When snapped around his neck it could be given a remote command to constrict, cutting off the bloodflow to his brain, rendering him unconscious. They were often used to restrain prisoners on work details. A constriction override command pulsed out from a central control unit, so the collar constricted when prisoners moved out of range and put a quick end to escapes.

Hal picked it up and let it dangle from one hand. “You'll have the control unit and it will be a dead-man device?”

“If I give a command or my pulse stops, the collar constricts. Without a key, or without trusting someone to shoot it off your neck, you'll be dead shortly after I am.”

Hal didn't want to put the collar on, but shooting her and then living a life on the run seemed to be his only alternative. “A lightsaber ought to be able to cut through this.”

“Perhaps, but the Jedi are all gone. The age of Imperial Justice is here, Hal Horn.”

“Of that I’m well aware.” Hal slipped the collar on, snapped it closed, then raised the collar on his shirt to hide it. He tossed out the Penetrator and slowly stood. “Here I am, at your service.”

Isard appeared and flashed him a quick glimpse of the control device, then holstered her blaster. “We resume our search at the place I first met you.”

“Don’t bother. Arky will be long gone. He knew you were Imp Intel long before I did.” Hal smiled. “Back to the Continuum Void. It’s the only place that stocked Gralish liqueur and Moranda’s a fiend for it. Having been shot the way she was, she’ll be wanting some fortification. That’s the best place to begin.”

# **Interlude at Darkknell**

## **Part Four**

### **by Timothy Zahn**

What are you talking about?” Isard demanded, the already wintry tone of her voice dropping into subzero territory as she leaned a few centimeters further over the Continuum Void’s bar. “He was here two hours ago. Where in this vat of rimspit could he have gone?”

“I don’t know, Agent Glasc,” the nervous-looking Devaronian standing on the far side of the bar stammered, twitching his way backward the same few centimeters Isard had moved forward. “As the Emperor himself is my witness, I truly do not know. All I can tell you is that he received a call half an hour ago, told me to handle the bar for the rest of the day, and then took off like Vader himself was after him. That’s all I know. I swear.”

“It probably is,” Hal murmured from Isard’s side, all his senses focused on the Devaronian. The species was easy enough to read if you knew what to look for. Hal did. “Offhand I’d say our quarry’s been busy cleaning up a few loose ends.”



“He has no idea what a loose end really is,” Isard said acidly, her smoldering eyes still pinning the hapless barman to the wall. But there was a subtle change in her tone, enough for Hal to recognize that the focus of her anger had shifted from the Devaronian to Moranda. To Moranda, and her as-yet-unidentified accomplice.

And that one was starting to worry Hal a little. Fine if it was some fellow criminal, either an old friend or a new acquaintance—dangerous enough, but at least fringe types were a relatively known psychological type. But under the circumstances, her ally could instead be a member of the Rebellion.

And *that* was another vat of vinks altogether. As the late and unlamented Trabler had pointed out, Rebels came in all sizes and shapes, with profiles that ranged from opportunistic to fanatical. Fringe criminals generally avoided killing law enforcement officials unless absolutely necessary, if only because it drew too much attention their direction. All too often, in contrast, fanatics reveled in both the violence and the notoriety.

Bad enough if some loose-laser Rebel shot him through the back for no reason.

Worse if a Rebel shot Isard instead, and her dead body was the last thing Hal wound up seeing as her choke-collar squeezed the life out of him.

“Fine,” Isard said, interrupting Hal’s increasingly unpleasant line of thought as she straightened back up from her interrogator’s lean. “If she spun him a story that he fell for that easily, it almost certainly had something to do with a relative or friend. I want their names. All of them. Now.”

The Devaronian gulped. “I—of course. Let me get his profile chart.”

Sidling down the bar, he escaped into the manager’s office. “Waste of time,” Hal murmured, turning around to lean his shoulder blades against the bar as he glanced over the handful of patrons. A mixture of simple workers and less simple fringe

types, he decided, fairly typical of places like this. “Even if we find him, and even if he got a good look at Moranda, she’s had more than enough time to change her appearance by now.”

“The fact she and Arkos thought the manager important enough to chase out of town implies *they’re* reasonably concerned about it,” Isard pointed out.

“Possibly,” Hal said. “Except that I don’t think it’s Arkos who’s running around with her.”

“Why not?” Isard argued. “He was right there at the scene. Probably even saw Trabler shoot her.”

“Which is exactly why it wasn’t him,” Hal said. “I know Arkos, and he’s emphatically not the type to get mixed up with a shooting. At least not without some serious pushing from someone else.”

Isard grunted. “Fine; so she’s picked up someone else. The point is that in setting up this wild skipper hunt they had to come at least part of the way out of the sideboards. If we can chase down the manager and backtrack the story they spun for him, we might be able to get another vector on them.”

“I see,” Hal murmured, throwing a sideways look at Isard’s profile. It was a reasonable approach, all right, classic in its straightforwardness.

Unfortunately, it also required a data-sifting team that would stretch halfway to Coruscant to pull it off. If she really had that much manpower here to draw on ...

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to do it all ourselves,” Isard continued, not bothering to look at him. Apparently, she was no slouch at reading people’s expressions, either. “There’s an Intelligence quiet-drop tucked away in one of the better parts of town where I can tap into Darkkneel Security’s computers. A few properly placed orders, and the locals will have the manager’s complete list of acquaintances tracked down by nightfall.”

“Um,” Hal said, thinking back to his own earlier interactions with Darkkneel officialdom. “You’d better hope they don’t tumble to what you’re doing,” he warned her mildly. “Colonel

Nyroska, for one, struck me as something of a stickler for proper protocol. Forged orders don't exactly come under that heading."

"Colonel Nyroska will do what he's told," Isard said coldly, dismissing Nyroska with the flick of an eyelash. "That goes for the rest of this rabble, too."

*And for me, too, I suppose?* Hal added silently, feeling with fresh awareness and fresh resentment the soft pressure of the choke-collar against his throat. A rhetorical question—of course it went for him, too. He was just one more of her tools, after all, like Darknell Security and Trabler and probably dozens of others whose broken lives lay scattered about in the dust of her wake. Maybe even hundreds, if the whispered stories about Armand Isard and his ambitious daughter were to be believed.

He eyed her profile again. Yes, he was a tool. But then, so was a lightsaber; and many was the overconfident would-be Jedi impersonator who had carelessly sliced off one of his own major limbs. Sometimes mishandled tools could be very dangerous.

Something to keep in mind.

The small man Moranda had pointed out heaved his travel bag into the transport's cargo area and then climbed into the passenger compartment, a vague sense of discomfort evident in the twitchiness of his movements. "He's getting aboard," Bel Iblis announced, lowering his macrobinoculars as a fresh twinge of guilt tugged at him. "Though what he's going to think when he gets to Raykel—"

"Keep watching the transport," Moranda interrupted him, her voice sounding distracted. "Make sure he's still aboard when it leaves. Anyway, what's the problem? He ought to be relieved when he finds out his father wasn't actually in any accident."

"I suppose so," Bel Iblis said, throwing a scowl at her. Seated at the apartment's battered dining table, frowning at a datapad, she was unfortunately oblivious to scowls at the moment. "On

the other hand, this wild skipper hunt isn't going to come cheap for him."

"Life never has been fair," she said. "If you're worried about it, have your Rebel friends reimburse him."

Bel Iblis snorted. "The Rebellion is hardly a bottomless money pit—"

"The transport, Garm," she said, jabbing a finger toward the window without looking up. "Watch the transport."

Swallowing back a curse, Bel Iblis turned to the window and raised the macrobinoculars again. Over the past few days he'd managed to force back the sharp agony of his family's deaths into a duller ache, a quiet pain that colored every waking minute but which at least left him able to function reasonably well.

But "reasonably well" didn't mean there wasn't an edge of impatience and bitterness to his attitude, an edge this casually arrogant little thief forever seemed to be stepping on. It was a constant battle to keep from blowing up in her face over what under normal circumstances he would have shrugged off as minor personality conflicts.

But it was an effort he had to make. An effort he forced himself to make. He needed her help to retrieve that datapack, to get this vital information that could conceivably make or break the Rebellion. And besides, his black mood wasn't her fault.

Three blocks away, the transport shuddered into motion and lumbered its way down the street. "There it goes," he announced to Moranda, turning back to her again. "And he didn't get off."

"Good," she said, setting aside her datapad with an air of satisfaction, taking a draw on her cigarra, and pulling out her comlink. "He wouldn't have been much use to your friend Isard anyway, but this should give her people something to do while we stir the kettle a bit."

"Which means what?"

"Which means it's time to give the law a call," she said. "I've pulled a likely name off your pal Arkos's private list of

incorruptible enforcement types. Let's hope he's also got the smarts to jump the direction we want him to."

She keyed the comlink and held it up. There was a moment's pause—"Nyroska," a crisp voice came from the instrument.

"Hello, Colonel," Moranda said. "You don't know me, but I have a small problem here and I thought you might be able to help."

Nyroska's sigh was just barely audible. "If you'll call your local Security office—"

"I have in my possession a very valuable and politically explosive item," Moranda interrupted him. "An item the Imperial Intelligence officer currently nosing around town very badly wants."

There was the briefest pause. "You're misinformed," Nyroska said. "There are no Imperial Intelligence agents on Darkknell."

"Let's not play games, Colonel," Moranda said, putting some huffiness into her voice. "You and I both know she's here. Frankly, she's pretty hard *not* to spot, what with that blond muscle-type and his Luxan Penetrator running interference for her. She's all over Xakrea, shaking the trees for a wayward Imperial datapack."

"I see," Nyroska said. His tone was studiously neutral, but Bel Iblis could hear the growing interest beneath it. "I take it the datapack is the valuable item you spoke of?"

"It is, indeed," Moranda confirmed. "Under normal circumstances, I'd get in touch with her directly to work out an exchange. Two problems: I don't have her comlink frequency, and I don't like the idea of Blondie and his Luxan lurking around the background. So I'd prefer to work the exchange through you."

"I don't know anything about Imperial agents on Darkknell," Nyroska said, his voice hardening. "But if you're in possession of stolen or misappropriated goods, the smartest thing you can do is bring everything to Defense Agency headquarters and turn it in."

"Okay by me," Moranda said. "You'll have the million ready?"

“The what?”

“The million,” Moranda repeated. “That’s in Imperial currency, by the way, not the local stuff.”

“You *must* be joking,” Nyroska said stiffly.

“Do you hear me laughing?” Moranda countered. “Trust me, Colonel, a million doesn’t even begin to mark what this is worth. The Imps will be willing to buy it from you for two million. The Rebellion, if you can find them, will probably pay three. But don’t take my word for it—talk to the Imp and see what she says. Of course, if you turn all this over to her she’ll probably cut you out of the profits; but hey, virtue is its own comfort, right?”

“And what makes you think an Imperial Intel agent won’t just laugh in my face? Assuming she’s not just a figment of your imagination.”

“Oh, she’s here,” Moranda assured him. “And she won’t be laughing. Believe me.”

Another pause. “All right, I’ll make some inquiries and see what I can find out. How do I get in touch with you?”

“I’ll call you,” Moranda told him. “Remember: one million even. Just pass on that message, and then if you want you can be out of it.”

She clicked off. “Now what?” Bel Iblis asked.

“Like I said, we hope he’s smart,” she said, getting up from the table and putting away both her comlink and datapad. “And on the assumption that he is, we vacate the premises. Now.”

For a moment Nyroska glared at the dead *comlink*. *Just pass on that message*, the words echoed in his ears, *and then you can be out of it*. “Not likely,” he murmured to himself. “Not flighty likely.”

He looked across the room at his aide. “Lieutenant?”

“Got it, Colonel,” Lieutenant Barclo reported briskly. “It came from one of the apartments in the Karflian Nestling block—fringe and lower-class mix, northern end of town. I’ve got an airspeeder squad on its way.”

“Send two more squads in as backup,” Nyroska ordered. “Then check and see if we’ve got Imperial Intel operating on Darknell at the moment.”

“I’m sure we’d have heard if anyone declared him or herself, Colonel.”

“We certainly should have,” Nyroska agreed grimly. “As I said: check.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nyroska set down his comlink and swiveled his chair toward the large holo map of the city behind him. If there was a foreign operative running through his city behind his back, he wanted to know about it.

And if said agent was chasing down something worth a million or more in Imperial currency, he most *definitely* wanted to know about it.

Accessing the spaceport’s database, he pulled up the recent arrivals section and keyed for a search.

The manager’s profile chart was short. Amazingly short. Suspiciously short.

“Sad, isn’t it,” Isard said contemptuously as Hal finished scanning through it.

“And they always think they’re not blindingly obvious to us.”

“They do indeed,” Hal agreed, handing back the datapad. The “personal” section of the manager’s profile had exactly twelve names in it: parents, one brother, and nine friends. There were Corellian fungal colonies that had longer associates lists than that. “Still, just because he’s gimmicking his associates list doesn’t mean he has any particular involvement with Moranda.”

“He’s fringe,” Isard said flatly. “That list practically screams it. And fringe types always stick together when the crunch begins.” She considered. “Not when we start tightening down, mind you, when they start having sprint-races to see who can crumble on each other the fastest. But up until then they stick together.”

“Perhaps,” Hal murmured, his gaze drifting to the city’s northern skyline. The single red-and-white airspeeder he’d spotted a moment ago had now been joined by two others, all of them scooting like their tails were on fire. Markings were impossible to see at this distance, but he’d seen airspeeders with that color scheme parked outside Colonel Nyroska’s office. “I presume we start with the family?”

“Since his truly close friends—assuming he’s got any—are undoubtedly not on that list, I’d say so,” Isard said acidly. “Unless they’re phonies, too. What do you think they’re up to?”

“Who?”

Isard gestured with her datapad. “Those three Darkknell Defense airspeeders,” she said. “Don’t try to tell me you hadn’t noticed them.”

“I noticed them,” Hal confirmed calmly. “You think they’ve got a line on your Rebel?”

“Can’t think what else they’d be using Defense personnel for,” Isard murmured, her mismatched eyes gazing thoughtfully at the now descending airspeeders. “Well, if they have, we can pull it out of their computer records at the quiet-drop.”

“We heading there now?”

“Soon enough,” Isard said, holding up the datapad. “I see a name on this profile that was also on Arkos’s frequent-customer list. Let’s go see if perhaps he hasn’t had the sense to vanish like everyone else.”

“Thank you for getting back to me so quickly,” Nyroska said into his comlink, glancing over the device at Barclo and giving him a sharp nod. Barclo nodded back and busied himself with the trace board.

“Not a problem,” the woman’s voice came back. “You ready to believe me yet about the Imp agent?”

“Possibly,” Nyroska said. “We don’t have your agent, but we do have a large blond human male in a tank down at the morgue.



The analysts tell me he was shot at close range with a Luxan Penetrator.”

There was a brief pause at the other end. “Interesting.”

“So you didn’t know he was dead?” Nyroska probed.

“Are you suggesting I had something to do with it?” she shot back.

“No, of course not,” Nyroska said soothingly. Which was, in point of fact, a true statement. He’d made a career of reading people’s faces and voices, and that brief pause had been all the reaction he needed to know the news had indeed taken her by surprise.

Which meant that while she might be a thief, she was not likely to be a murderer. A point in her favor. “I merely brought it up to let you know that that part of your story checks out.”

“I’m happy about it if you are,” she said, with just a trace of sarcasm. “But until and unless you get to the Imp agent herself, we’re no further along than when we started.”

“Not necessarily,” Nyroska said. “Now that I know that your story has some actual substance to it, I can hopefully persuade my superiors to take the matter seriously.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’d like to meet with you,” he said. “No obligations or promises, except of course that I won’t try to arrest you or take the merchandise. For now I just want to talk.”

“Yeah, right,” the woman sniffed. “All completely clear and aboveboard.”

“Exactly,” Nyroska said, turning up the calm trustworthiness in his voice to full power. “You have to realize you’re in a seriously untenable position, especially with a dead body in the morgue that the Intel agent might well believe is your doing. I may be the only one who can help you. And you can check with your fringe friends that I keep my word.”

There was another long pause. “I’ll think about it,” the woman said at last. “I’ll call you later.”

The connection clicked off. “Barclo?”

"She's moved south to the edge of Little Duros," the lieutenant reported. "I've got three airspeeders on the way."

Nyroska nodded. "A waste of time, probably."

"She does seem to be pretty good at slipping out of nets," Barclo conceded. "So what now? Wait until she calls again?"

"More or less," Nyroska said, peering at his computer display. The dead man's ID was being backtracked, along with that of the woman who'd arrived at the spaceport with him, but so far both probes were coming up dry. Probably another waste of time. "Anything on the landspeeder they rented?"

"Hasn't been spotted yet," Barclo said. "Of course, an Imperial might have altered the reg tag just on general principles."

"An unlikely term to use in the same breath with Imperial agents," Nyroska growled, scowling at the display. "I think it's about time we took back some of the initiative. I want you to check with the General as to how fast we could put together a sizable cash package."

Barclo's jaw dropped slightly. "You want to pay her off?"

"Not without knowing what exactly she's got," Nyroska said. "But if it *does* turn out to be as explosive as she claims, it would be nice to have some options available."

"I suppose," Barclo said, shaking his head. "I just hope you're not getting in too deep, Colonel. This is Imperial Intelligence we're dealing with, you know."

"This is *my* world, Barclo," Nyroska said coldly. "*Our* world, not Palpatine's. He may someday be able to run the whole Empire from Coruscant, but until then we do have certain jurisdictional and governmental rights here on Darkknell. And I am flighty well going to exercise those rights."

"Yes, sir," Barclo said, sounding subdued as he reached for his comlink. "I'll call the General right now."

Moranda clicked off her comlink. "Come on," she said.

They crossed the street and entered the sweets shop she had marked before making her call to Nyroska. Weaving through the mass of mostly Duros customers, she led the way back to the employees' entrance in the rear and down a flight of steps to the street at the bottom of the hill. With gratifying promptness, the street-maintenance speeder truck she'd spotted from their earlier vantage point came lumbering by just as they reached the street, and a moment later she and Garm were safely nestled into the empty debris-storage bin in the back.

"You don't think they'll search this thing?" Garm asked, looking cautiously out through the rear access opening they'd just climbed in through.

"Not when they see the bin is already full of dirt," Moranda told him, unfastening her outer skirt and pulling it off. Flipping it over so that its brown side was showing, she arranged it across their feet and knees where it would be all that could be seen through the opening without a close examination. "It's all in perception."

"I suppose." He hesitated. "So he was shot with his own weapon?"

"Unless someone else in town is packing a Luxan," Moranda agreed soberly. "What do you think? Horn, or Isard herself?"

"Hard to believe it of either of them," Garm said, shaking his head. "Unless Isard found the datacards and assumed her assistant was in on it."

"Could be," Moranda said, studying Garm's face out of the corner of her eye. They'd kept their introductions on a strict first-name-only basis; but even through the simplistic disguise he was wearing there was something vaguely familiar about this man.

His eyes in particular. Very strong and knowing eyes, they were, rich with knowledge and wisdom and some deep but very private pain. Recent pain, too, if she was any judge of such things. Or maybe it was his voice. Was he someone she might have heard speaking on the newsnets?

Decisively, she turned her eyes away. The situation piqued her curiosity, but at the moment she had more urgent things to worry about than another man on the run. “Any sign of the airspeeders yet?”

“Oh, they’re out there,” Garm assured her, leaning over Moranda’s knees to peer out past their makeshift camouflage. “Whatever else Colonel Nyroska might be, he’s also fast on his feet.”

“Yes,” Moranda agreed. “Well, one more call hopefully should do it.”

“Do what, get us caught?” Garm asked pointedly. “Aside from appealing to your playful side, I don’t know what these calls are supposed to accomplish.”

“We need to flush Isard out of hiding,” Moranda told him patiently. “That means drawing her to some known location. Assuming she’s smart enough to notice all this Defense airspeeder activity, I’m hoping it will intrigue her enough to head to one of the Security offices to find out what’s going on. The only trick will be guessing which one she’ll pick.”

“Probably none of them,” Garm said. “Odds are she’ll go to the local Intelligence drop site instead.”

Moranda blinked. “Intelligence drop site?”

“Sure,” Garm said. “It’ll have computer access capabilities, and maybe some extra personnel she can draw on. Probably not, though—this station should be too small to be continually staffed.”

Moranda stared at his profile. “How do you know about all this?”

He shrugged. “I have access to certain files.”

“Terrific,” she growled. “And it didn’t occur to you to mention this to me before now?”

He turned those piercing eyes on her. “Before now, I didn’t know what you were going for,” he reminded her mildly.

She ground her teeth. But he was right. “One of these days we really have to get our act together,” she said. “Fine. Where is this drop site?”

“It’s a small, apparently out-of-business boutique in the main west-side shopping district,” he told her. “I don’t remember the name, but I have the address.”

“Good enough,” she said. “As soon as we’re clear of Nyroska’s net, we’ll find a landspeeder and get over there.” She frowned as a sudden thought struck her. “I don’t suppose this place would have a cache of extra weapons Isard could load up with, would it?”

“Probably.”

Moranda nodded grimly. “Terrific.”

They’d been sitting at the back of the crowded open-air tapcafe next to the ClearSkys Boutique for nearly half an hour when Moranda suddenly straightened up and nodded. “There she is,” she said, nodding over the lip of her mug toward Bel Iblis’s right.

Casually, taking a sip from his own drink as he did so, Bel Iblis looked in that direction. Barely twenty meters away a familiar landspeeder was pulling into a parking zone. And out of it stepped—

“Well, well, well,” Moranda murmured. “Horn’s still with her.”

“I told you Isard spun him a story back at Arkos’s place,” Bel Iblis reminded her.

“Sure, but I wouldn’t have expected him to still be tagging along,” Moranda said. “He should have sliced through her story long ago.”

“Or else she should have gotten whatever she wanted from him and tossed him away,” Bel Iblis agreed, frowning as Horn turned slowly around beside the landspeeder, automatically checking out the area. His eyes passed over them without a flicker of recognition, the breeze pulling his collar open as he continued his turn—“Give me your macrobinoculars. Quickly.”

“What’s up?” Moranda asked, passing the tiny set to him beneath the table.

“Possible trouble,” Bel Iblis told her. Concealing the macrobinoculars with hands and mug, he lifted them to his eyes and focused in on Horn’s neck as they crossed the street toward the boutique.

One clear look was all it took. “Make that definite trouble,” he said grimly, lowering the macrobinoculars. “Horn’s wearing a choke-collar.”

“Oh, lovely,” Moranda said. “What a pleasant woman your Ysanne Isard is.”

Isard keyed the door lock, and she and Horn disappeared into the ClearSkies.

“This changes things, Moranda,” Bel Iblis said quietly, bracing himself for the inevitable argument. “That choke-collar’s going to have a dead-man switch attached. I’m not going to risk Horn’s death if Isard drops the thing or is injured or killed.”

“I agree,” she said. “On the other hand, there’s no way I’m going to try to sneak those datacards out of the car if you aren’t pinning them down with blaster fire—”

“Wait a second,” Bel Iblis cut her off, frowning. The inevitable had failed to happen. “Did you hear what I said? Horn’s a good and valuable man, and I’m not going to risk his life.”

“Yes, I heard you,” she said. “I said I agreed.”

“But—” He floundered.

She lifted her eyebrows. “What, just because Horn’s chased me halfway across the Empire you think I should be willing and eager to let him get vaped?”

“Something like that, yes.”

She shifted her gaze away from and back to the boutique. “Strange as it may seem, Garm, over the past few years I’ve gotten sort of used to having Horn on my tail. He’s a pretty good opponent, you know, well worth matching wits against. I rather enjoy that sort of challenge.”

She smiled wryly. “Besides, I know that if he’s the one who brings the hammer down on me, I’ll be treated fairly. In Palpatine’s grand new Empire there aren’t a lot of enforcement types I would trust that far.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same side on this,” Bel Iblis said, some of the tightness lifting from his chest. Arkos had known little about this woman except her name, but her airy confidence, deviousness, and pocket-picking talents had created in his mind the stereotypical fringe image, someone willing to do whatever it took to get what she wanted. The fact that casual murder, or even collateral murder, was apparently outside her ethical boundaries made working with her considerably more palatable to his own conscience.

In fact, it made her no worse than some of those he was already fighting alongside in the Rebellion. Maybe even no worse than the average. “So what now?” Moranda bit gently at her lip. “Were you able to get any details on the choke-collar?” she asked. “Design, manufacturer—anything?”

Bel Iblis searched his memory. “All I could see was that it was black,” he said. “Oh, and it had what looked like a small keylock to the left of his throat.”

“Interesting,” she said thoughtfully. “Probably a Jostrian design, then—they use straight mechanical keylocks to keep anyone from scanning along lock frequencies and unfastening it.”

“So we can’t do anything?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said, still thoughtful. “Keep watch here—I’m going to pop into that little electronics shop over there.”

“And then?”

She patted his hand. “Trust me.”

“I was right,” Isard said, tapping keys on the quiet-drop’s computer. “Those Defense airspeeders were indeed responding to your friend Savich.”

“Does it identify her by name?” Hal asked.

Isard threw him a contemptuous look. “Of course it does. And she included her ID listing and associates profile, too. If you’re going to ask stupid questions, Horn, keep your mouth shut.”

Hal clamped down firmly on his tongue as Isard turned back to the computer with a snort. She had been becoming progressively more ill-tempered as the day wore on, and finding that their last known link between Arkos and the Continuum Void manager had flown the nest had apparently been the last click. The anger and frustration and bloodlust were simmering barely beneath the surface, held in check by sheer force of will.

And if something didn’t break soon, Hal suspected, some of that bloodlust could very well expend itself on a convenient CorSec inspector whom she was clearly starting to consider less than useful to her.

He swallowed, the movement of his throat constricted noticeably by the unyielding noose around his neck. What in the name of Vader’s tailor was in that missing datapack, anyway?

And then, at his belt, his comlink beeped.

Isard spun around as if she’d been stung. “What’s that?” she demanded.

“My comlink,” Hal said.

“I know it’s your comlink,” she bit out icily, sliding out of her chair and stepping over to him. “Who knows you’re here?”

“Only Colonel Nyroska,” Hal said, pulling out the device. “Do you want me to answer it?”

“Of course,” she said, stepping close to him. “Maybe he’s got a line on Savich.”

Hal nodded and clicked it on. “Horn.”

“Hello, Inspector,” a cheerful female voice replied. “It’s Moranda Savich. How are you?”

Hal felt his breath catch in his throat. “How did you get this frequency?”



“Oh, don’t be silly,” she chided. “You registered it when you arrived on Darkknell, remember? Unfortunately, your friend the Imp didn’t do that, at least not under a name I could find. Is she there with you, by any chance?”

“I’m here,” Isard spoke up, glacially calm. “You have my datapack?”

“Sure, if you have my money,” Moranda said. “The price is one million, in Imperial currency.”

Hal looked furtively at Isard’s face, wondering if she was approaching meltdown yet. But to his surprise, the eyes gazing back at him were as calm and cool as any he’d ever seen. With at least a potential handle on the situation now, her earlier frustration and irritation had evaporated into complete professionalism.

“You have a rather inflated opinion of what it’s worth,” Isard said. “I’ll pay you a hundred thousand.”

Moranda sniffed audibly. “That’s pretty chintzy, even for an Imperial. If you don’t want to play, I’m sure someone else will.”

“Like Colonel Nyroska, for instance?”

“Exactly like Colonel Nyroska,” Moranda said approvingly. “That’s right—I forget sometimes how adept you Imps are at slicing into official computer systems. You wouldn’t happen to have noticed if he’s pulled together his million yet, would you?”

“He’s started making inquiries,” Isard confirmed calmly. “I can assure you, though, that you’d rather deal with me.”

“My plan is to deal with the top bidder,” Moranda said pointedly. “Still, I’m sure Imperial Intelligence can bid higher than a backwater fuel stop like Darkknell.”

“Most certainly,” Isard said, her voice almost silky with implied menace. “Along with that hundred thousand I can also guarantee you the chance to leave here with your skin intact.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Moranda sniffed. “I’ve eluded Inspector Horn for years—you think I can’t do the same with Imperial Intelligence?”

“No,” Isard said flatly. “I don’t think you can.”

“Hear me shaking,” Moranda said. “Here’s the deal. I’ll give you and Nyroska an hour to put together your packages—cash only, of course. Then I’ll meet you both at the Number Fourteen warehouse in the Firtee Cluster north of town, and one of you will leave with the datapack. Clear?”

“Very,” Isard said softly.

“And don’t insult my intelligence by trying anything cute,” Moranda warned. “I’m quite good at this sort of game. One hour, and come alone.”

The comlink clicked off. “Certainly we’ll come alone,” Isard agreed, as if talking to herself as she sat back down at the computer. “We wouldn’t want the inconvenience of witnesses, would we?”

“What are we doing?” Hal asked as she began keying the terminal.

“I am clearing out the potential ground clutter,” she told him. “Specifically, I’m sending Colonel Nyroska’s entire contingent on a little impromptu training exercise.”

Hal felt his jaw drop. “You aren’t serious. There’s no way he won’t catch something that blatant.”

“Let him,” Isard retorted. “By the time his squawks get anyone’s attention the datapack and I will be long gone.”

Hal grimaced. “Leaving him with nothing to do but find someone to pin the blame on. Me, for instance?”

Isard favored him with a cool, dispassionate look, then turned back to the computer. “Think of it as your opportunity to provide a unique service to the Empire.”

“Yes,” Hal murmured. “Of course.”

“I can’t say the General’s exactly thrilled by the situation,” Barclo reported, clicking off his comlink. “But he *is* rather intrigued by it. He says that if you can prove this datapack is genuinely worth a million, he can have the money ready in two hours.”

“Good,” Nyroska said, clicking keys on his computer. “Well, well: the backtrack on our big blond cipher down in the morgue just came up empty. Which means his ID was completely phony.”

“Big surprise,” Barclo grunted. “Half the IDs in south Xakrea are probably phony.”

“Yes, but not of this quality,” Nyroska said. “His tracked all the way back to Coruscant before it petered out. That means—”

He broke off as his comlink beeped. “Here we go,” he said, picking it up. “I’ll bet you your next promotion this is her.” He keyed it on. “Nyroska.”

“Colonel?” an unfamiliar human male voice said. “My name is—well, never mind that. I’m an associate—former associate, rather—of the woman you’ve been dealing with on this datapack matter.”

“I see,” Nyroska said. “What can I do for you?”

“You can get me out of this mess, that’s what,” the other said nervously. “This whole thing’s gotten completely out of hand. Did you know she’s actually baiting an Imperial Intelligence agent? This is getting way too dangerous, and I’m ready to cut my losses and get out.”

“I applaud your wisdom,” Nyroska said. “Get me the datapack, and I’ll see to it that you walk away.”

There was a pause. “Yeah,” the caller said at last, a little uncertainly. “Problem: I don’t actually have it myself. But I can finger her for you, and she *does* know where it is. She’ll be coming back to a tapcafe right next to something called the ClearSkies Boutique, and she’ll be back any minute now. Get over here fast, okay?”

“We’re on our way,” Nyroska promised. On the last word, the comlink clicked off.

“Well?” he added to Barclo.

“Could be a feint,” Barclo said, frowning at his board. “On the other hand, the trace puts him in that area. I’d say it’s worth checking out.”

“Agreed,” Nyroska said, keying his computer. He paused, keyed it again. “What in—?”

“What is it?” Barclo asked.

“My troops,” Nyroska said, waving at the computer. “They’ve all been sent out to the spaceport.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Nyroska gritted, slapping at the keys. “They’re phony orders—they have to be. The General wouldn’t have pulled them without alerting me first. But the orders show proper authorization, and they’re locked in.” He swore. “And the troops are locked incommunicado, too.”

Abruptly he got to his feet. “Ten to one it’s a delaying tactic by our datapack thief,” he ground out. “And I have no intention of being delayed. Grab Thykele from the outer office, and let’s go.”

“You think three of us will be enough?” Barclo asked, pulling his blaster from a desk drawer as he stood up.

“We’ll make it enough,” Nyroska said grimly, checking his own blaster and jamming it into his holster. “*This* time she’s not getting away.”

They had left the boutique and were heading across the street when Hal’s comlink beeped again. “Do I answer it?” he asked.

“Probably better,” Isard grunted, getting a grip on his arm and leading him over to the side of the street beside their landspeeder. “Savich may not be finished playing her little games yet.”

Hal pulled out the instrument, giving the area around them an automatic once-over as he did so. There’d been some turnover in the tapcafe’s clientele since they’d gone inside the boutique, and a half block farther down the street a couple of Kubaz were unloading a speeder truck, but nothing else seemed to have changed. “Horn.”

“Hello, Inspector,” Moranda’s voice came back. “Just wanted to see if you and your Imp were still on schedule.”

“We’re working on it, yes,” Hal said.

“Good,” Moranda said cheerfully. “I also wanted to tell you that I’ve talked now with Nyroska, and he’s ready to offer me two million.”

“Is he, now?” Isard put in, glaring at the comlink in Hal’s hand as if it were a display Moranda could see her through. Down the street, one of the Kubaz dropped a crate onto the street with a loud thud. “Now you listen to me, you little walking dead woman,” she bit out. “And listen closely.”

She began voicing an exquisitely detailed threat, a recitation Hal would normally have paid close attention to if only for professional interest. But in this case, he wasn’t even listening. Isard, her full attention focused on her anger and pride and threats, had apparently missed completely the fact that the crash of that dropped crate had been echoed faintly on Moranda’s comlink carrier.

Which meant that Moranda was here somewhere.

Slowly, carefully, Hal let his eyes track across the area, studying every visible face and searching windows and doorways for less than visible ones. His gaze fell on a woman about fifteen meters away at one of the tapcafe tables, her face in profile to him as she gazed meditatively at the distant mountains rising over the cityscape, a mug held to her lips. She was the right height and build, but he could see both hands clearly enough to tell there was no comlink palmed in either of them. Unless she had the device clipped to her collar or something ...

“I get the point,” Moranda put in, cutting off Isard’s threat. “Here’s the route I want you to follow to the warehouse. Listen closely, and don’t interrupt.”

She launched into a detailed list of streets, comers, turns, and backtracks. As she did so, the woman at the tapcafe table set her mug down and stood up, digging a coin out of her hip pouch and dropping it on the table. She turned toward Hal and Isard and started in their direction, glancing back and forth between the various business signs lining the street.

And there indeed was no comlink fastened to her collar, nor a telltale bulge beneath her jacket where one might be hidden. Listening with half an ear to Moranda's instructions droning on from his comlink, Hal shifted his attention back to the doorways around the area. She had to be here somewhere....

"Hal?" a woman's voice called excitedly. "Hal Horn?"

He wrenched his eyes back to the woman approaching them. She was looking at him with wide eyes, her mouth gaping open in a happy grin of recognition. "It *is* you," she said, now almost bounding as she closed the distance toward him. "Well, I'll be a mynock's breakfast. Allyse Conroy—remember? How *are* you?"

"Uh," Hal said, glancing in confusion at Isard as he searched his memory in vain for an Allyse Conroy. "I'm ..."

Isard plucked the comlink from his hand. "We've got trouble," she cut into Moranda's monologue. "Call us back in ten minutes." Without waiting for a response, she clicked off.

"Imagine running into you here on Darkknell, of all places," the approaching woman said, her grin if anything even bigger than it had been. "How are Nyche and Corran? He's what, sixteen years old now?"

"Eighteen," he said, flinching back as she raised her arms for a hug. But her ebullience was hardly to be stopped by anything as simple as a flinch, and the next thing he knew she had her arms around him, pressing her body tightly against his. "Ah—Allyse--"

"It's so good to see you," she said, her voice oddly muffled as she spoke into his shoulder, her face pressed against the left side of his face, her breath disconcertingly warm on his neck. "How have you been these last few years?" Hal glanced past the side of her head. Isard had now stepped around behind her and was giving Hal the same kind of look she'd just been giving the comlink. "Actually, Allyse, I'm kind of busy right now," he told her, trying to diplomatically ease her away from him. A waste of effort; her arms merely tightened all the harder around him. "In fact, I'm in the middle of something very important. I have to go."

"Imagine finding you here," she repeated. "Is this destiny, or what?"

Isard's eyes were starting to throw sparks. Bracing himself, Hal took a deep breath and got a firm grip on Allyse's ribs.

And abruptly froze. Faintly detectable with that incoming breath had been two distinctive aromas: the pungent tang of cigarra smoke, plus the more subtle scent of Gralish liqueur.

Moranda Savich?

He opened his mouth to speak; but before he could get the proper words lined up, the arms pinioning the two of them together loosened and she stepped back. He caught just a glimpse of the slender lockjimm between her lips before it vanished again into her mouth and belatedly noticed the pressure of the choke-collar around his neck had disappeared—

And with her grin still in place, Allyse backed full tilt into Isard.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped, twisting around with feline speed and grabbing Isard's jacket in time to keep her from falling backward. "So very clumsy of me," she added, busily brushing down Isard's jacket where her grip had momentarily wrinkled it. "Are you all right?"

"Get away," Isard snapped, putting a palm against Allyse's chest and pushing her away. The shove sent her sprawling back against the side of the landspeeder, her hands scrabbling for balance and finding a grip across the top of the door.

"Well, sure," Allyse said in a subdued tone.

"You don't have to be so rough," Hal reproved Isard gently, his eyes probing Allyse's face. Usually he was able to pull Moranda's features out from under the mask of her many and varied disguises, but here, at first blush, anyway, he couldn't seem to find her anywhere in that indignant expression. Maybe it wasn't her, after all.

"She should be thankful I *didn't* get rough," Isard countered acidly. "Now get away from our landspeeder. We have business to attend to."

"I don't think so," a voice called from Hal's right.

He turned. Colonel Nyroska, flanked by two uniformed Defense officers, was striding in their direction. All three had blasters drawn. "Colonel Nyroska," Hal nodded. "What brings you down here?"

"Your friend there, Inspector Horn," Nyroska said, his gaze shifting over Hal's shoulder. "She and I need to have a long talk."

"My friend?" Hal frowned, turning back to look at Allyse.

But she was not, as he'd expected, waiting with the wilted, defeated look of a criminal or fugitive who'd finally been run to ground. Instead, she was standing tall and proud, an almost haughty expression on her face. "I commend you on your excellent timing, Colonel," she said in a voice that matched the face as she gestured at Isard. "There's your thief, and my Rebel agent. Arrest her."

The sheer effrontery of it caught Isard completely flatfooted. "What in the—?" she sputtered. "You little—back off!" she snapped as one of Nyroska's men reached for her arm. "Back off, all of you."

Her hand dived beneath her jacket, then froze in place as three blasters suddenly lined up on her face. "You're making a big mistake, Colonel," she said quietly. "A big mistake. I'm Imperial Intelligence Field Operative Ysanne Isard."

"Indeed," Nyroska said calmly. "You have ID, of course?"

"Of course," she said, shifting her hand elsewhere beneath her jacket. Her hand paused, her face changed, and she spun her head around at Allyse. "Give it back," she snapped. "My ID. Give it back."

"Nice try," Allyse said patronizingly, lifting her arms. "As you're welcome to confirm, Colonel, I don't have anything of hers. However, if you'll escort us back to your headquarters, I'll be happy to have my staff transmit the credentials she mentioned."

Isard's mouth dropped open. "You'll *what*?"



“Present my credentials,” Allyse said, turning a glacial look on Isard. “You see, Colonel, I am Field Operative Ysanne Isard.”

“This has gone far enough,” Isard snarled. “Horn, tell the Colonel exactly who I am.”

“Inspector Horn?” Nyroska invited.

Hal hesitated. “She did tell me she was Field Operative Isard,” he conceded. “But the only ID she showed me identified her as Darkknell Special Security agent Katya Glasc.”

“Did it, now,” Nyroska said, his voice suddenly cold as he looked at Isard with heightened interest. “Impersonating law enforcement personnel is a class-one offense on Darkknell. And is she by any chance the one who put that highly illegal device around your neck?”

Hal reached up and pulled the loosened choke-collar away. “Yes,” he said, handing it to the colonel.

Isard’s eyes were simmering pools of death. “You’re dead, Horn. Dead.”

“I can only say what I know,” Hal said. “Anything in the way of further proof is up to you.”

“Indeed it is,” she breathed. “All right, Colonel, you win. Let’s go to your headquarters and sort this out.” She looked at Allyse. “Let’s *all* of us go.”

“Of course,” Nyroska said softly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Bel Iblis waited five minutes after Moranda and the others had left the scene before cautiously approaching the now abandoned landspeeder and letting himself in. No one shouted in triumph at his appearance; no one, so far as he could tell, even noticed him. Two minutes later, working awkwardly in the cramped space, he had the inner door panel off.

The datacards were there, all right, jumbled together at the bottom of the narrow space. Nestled in among them was an

extra datacard, this one bearing official Imperial markings. Ysanne Isard's missing Intelligence ID, no doubt.

For a moment Bel Iblis considered taking it with him, decided it wasn't worth the risk of getting caught with it, and left it where it was. Besides, if Moranda was right about being able to talk her way out of detention—though how she was going to do that he couldn't even begin to imagine—she might want to track down the vehicle and borrow the ID herself.

He refastened the panel loosely back in place, feeling a twinge of stung conscience as he did so. Yes, this had all been Moranda's idea in the first place, a challenge she'd seemed eager to take on, but this was his mission, and the Rebellion's, and yet it was Moranda who had ended up doing most of the work and taking all of the risks.

And not for the flat million in Imperial currency she'd demanded from Isard, but for the relative pittance he and Arkos had been able to throw together. Someday, if they all lived through this, he would have to find a way to make it up to her.

And the first step in the survival process, he reminded himself, would be to rendezvous with Arkos and get himself and these datacards off Darkknell and back to the Rebellion. And there to find out what exactly Tarkin's Death Star project entailed.

"Good luck, Moranda," he murmured as he climbed out of the landspeeder and closed the door gently behind him. "May the Force be with you. May it be with us all."

Hal would have bet money that Isard's eyes couldn't have gotten more wild than they had been outside the ClearSkyses Boutique. He was wrong.

"What do you *mean* she's gone?" she thundered, looming over Nyroska's desk like a berserk storm cloud. "How could she be gone? You locked her in a *cell*, for Palpatine's sake!"

"I'm sorry, Field Operative Isard," Nyroska said apologetically, clearly trying to press as far back into his chair as he could

manage. "My people assured me she was properly secured. Apparently they were wrong."

"Apparently they were idiots," Isard shot back. "And what precisely are you doing to recapture her?"

"We have an all-planet alert out," Nyroska told her. "If she's still on Darkknell, we'll get her."

Isard's snort concisely delivered her opinion of that. "And you," she bit out, turning her glare onto Hal. "If I find out that was Savich—and that you knew she was and didn't say anything—I'll have your head for shockball practice. Clear?"

"Clear," Hal said. "And I repeat: I don't see how it could have been her standing there hugging me when she was on the comlink at the same time giving us directions to the warehouse. Best guess is that it was her ally running interference for her."

"In that case, you'd better hope Nyroska catches her," Isard said. "Because if she or anyone else gets off the planet with that datapack, I'll have both your heads."

She turned back to Nyroska. "I'll be at my ship," she ground out. "You've got my comlink frequency. Let me know if anything turns up on either woman. *Anything*. Understood?"

"We will, Field Operative Isard," Nyroska said humbly.

Spinning around, she stalked to the door and stomped out.

Nyroska exhaled raggedly. "We're in trouble now, Inspector," he said quietly. "The whole Empire may be in trouble if that datapack gets off-planet," Hal agreed. "At least, if her reaction to the whole situation is anything to go by. But to be honest, I don't think you and I are going to take the brunt of it, not from her anyway. Isard has about three TIE squadrons' worth of pride, and bringing official Intelligence wrath down on us will put her in an embarrassingly bad light."

"As bad a light as it would put us in?"

"Probably not," Hal conceded. "But people like that only risk losing face if the potential rewards are worth it. Frankly, neither of us qualify." He shook his head. "No, whatever shrapnel comes of this is going to hit elsewhere."

“Against members of the Rebel Alliance, perhaps?”

Hal shrugged. “Or those Isard decides are members,” he said. “Whether they are or not.”

Nyroska tapped his fingertips against the side of his desk. “A mess, indeed,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be in her boots when she has to go back and report this to her father.”

Hal nodded soberly. “I’ll drink to that.”

“What is this?” the barman demanded, frowning at the two small items resting in the palm of his hand.

“They were inside the mug at that table over there,” the young cleaner said excitedly, pointing across the tapcafe. “The one where the dark-haired woman was sitting.”

“Which? The one involved in that Defense Agency todo down the street?”

“Yes, her.” The cleaner pointed at the comlink in the barman’s hand. “See, the comlink is still on. I tried talking, but no one answered.”

“Cut off from the other end,” the barman grunted.

“That’s what I thought,” the cleaner agreed. “But that recorder is the really strange part. Go ahead—play it.”

Throwing the kid a speculative look from under his bushy eyebrows, the barman plucked the wafer-thin recorder from his palm and touched the play button.

“Next, you’re to cross the street and pick up a northbound transport,” a female voice came from the device. “If there isn’t one there, just wait—there will be. You ride it to the corner of Pontrin and Jedilore, then get off and go into the clothing store you’ll find on the corner—”

“You hear that?” the cleaner said. “It’s like a treasure hunt, isn’t it?”

The barman sniffed. “It’s a prank,” he declared, shutting off the recording and thrusting it and the comlink back at the cleaner. “Here—you can keep them.”

The kid took them uncertainly. "But what if it isn't a prank?"

"It is," the barman assured him with a sniff. "Trust me, lad. There's no treasure worth hunting for on Darkknell. Never has been; never will be."

# Epilogue

## by Michael A. Stackpole

Armand Isard looked up from his desk, slightly more angry that his daughter had left the door open behind her than that she had entered without requesting permission to do so. She advanced toward him too quickly, her mismatched eyes ablaze. He held up a hand, then pointed to the chair before his desk. “Please, be seated.”

She glanced at the chair, then looked at him. “Can I be sure it is safe?”

“If the result of this operation was for you to be killed, you’d already be dead, Agent Isard.” Armand tried to keep his voice as cold as he would when addressing any insubordinate operative in his organization, but a hint of anger bled into it anyway. “Please.”

She settled herself onto its brown synthleather cushion, though her body seemed as tense as if he were asking her to sit in a chair bristling with sharp transparisteel fragments.

He tapped the datapad on his desk. “I’ve read the report you sent about the action on Darkknell, and I have spoken to the

Emperor on your behalf. You won't be killed despite your failure."

Her posture eased a bit, but not quite in the way he would have expected. She leaned forward, less stiff, more supple, like a predator getting ready to pounce. "I do not fear for my life at the Emperor's hands, Father."

"No?"

"No. He read the report on Darkknell, the full report on Darkknell."

Her words froze his heart in his chest, and the appearance of two Royal Guards slipping in through the open doorway started it beating again, very fast. "What do you mean? What full report?"

Ysanne snorted. "Did you think I wouldn't see what was going on, *Father*? You send me off on a mission of incredible delicacy—one you clearly would give only to an agent you had the utmost trust in. It was also a mission that would get that operative killed if she failed, and that was your aim all along."

"This is nonsense!"

"Hardly." Ysanne let a smile slither across her lips. "You see, Father, your plan succeeded. The information you wanted stolen has been communicated to the Rebels, and we know you had a hand in it. I found fingerprints and other trace evidence that identified the Rebel agent sent to retrieve the plans. It was Garm Bel Iblis."

Armand Isard's stomach folded in on itself. "Bel Iblis? Impossible. He was blown up. The bomb killed his whole family."

"Oh, well acted, Father, very well acted, but we both know that's not true, don't we?" She laughed lightly. "You got word to Bel Iblis and got him out of the bomb's range. You didn't mean it for him anyway: you wanted his wife, Arrianya, dead. She was the last link he had to the Empire. She was devoted to the Emperor, so at the bidding of Rebel Masters you had her slain, forcing Bel Iblis to ally himself fully to the Rebellion."

“That’s absurd, completely untrue and absurd.” Armand forced himself to breathe normally. “You have no proof of any of this.”

“You approved the operation that was supposed to kill Bel Iblis, so you clearly knew how to thwart it. And you sent me out on a mission you knew would fail so I would be eliminated. You would use my death at the Emperor’s order as an excuse to go over to the Rebellion. With you there to reveal the Empire’s secrets to them—and the Death Star datacards were proof you could deliver—they would welcome you. You would overthrow the Emperor, then betray your Rebel companions and take the throne yourself. It’s a brilliant plan, Father, simple and yet so effective.”

Armand shot to his feet and pointed at the Royal Guards. “Arrest her. Clearly she has gone over to the Rebellion and has concocted this story to remove me, crippling the effort to find and destroy the Rebels.”

Neither of the scarlet-armored Royal Guards moved.

Ysanne Isard stood and slowly smoothed her tunic. “They’re here, *Father*, to conduct you to the Emperor. I believe he wishes to discuss with you the course of the rest of your life. It is to be a short conversation.”

Armand Isard stared gape jawed at his daughter, then closed his mouth and sighed. “I had expected this someday, you know, Ysanne.”

“Of course; I *am* your daughter.” She came around the side of his desk and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “It’s over for you now, Father, but fear not.” She dropped herself into his chair. “The Isard legacy is in very good hands.”



# Jade Solitaire

## by Timothy Zahn

Excuse me, folks—I'm looking for Talon Karrde."

Mara Jade looked up from the engine monitor, peripherally aware that, on the other side of the board, Chin was doing the same. The voice coming from the direction of the *Wild Karrde's* bridge door was completely unfamiliar to her.

As, she discovered, was the face that came with the voice. "Captain Karrde isn't here at the moment," Mara told the stranger, eyeing him narrowly. Just because they were in a familiar docking bay in a familiar port was no reason why strangers should be wandering loose around the ship. "How did you get in here?"

The man waved vaguely behind him. "Oh, Dankin was back at the hatchway, and he let me in. Karrde and I are old friends—he and I go way back. Any idea when he'll be showing up?"

"I really couldn't say," Mara said, throwing a glance at Chin. Someone who went way back with Karrde should logically go way back with Chin, too, given how long the older man had been

with the organization. But there was no recognition on Chin's face, either. "If you'd like, you can leave a message."

The man sighed deeply. "No, I'm afraid that won't do." He waved toward the viewport behind them and the bustling spaceport scene beyond it.

Abruptly, the back of Mara's neck tingled with subtle warning. Her right hand dropped to the blaster holstered at her side—

And froze there. The intruder's waving hand had abruptly split open down the middle, revealing the blaster that had been hidden inside the prosthetic shell. "And I don't have time to wait for him, either," he said, his voice as unconcerned as ever. "My employer would like a word with all of you. He'd prefer you arrive undamaged, but he'd understand if that's not possible."

Mara hissed softly between her teeth. On her own, she knew, she could take him easily, trick weapon or no. But she wasn't alone, and Chin didn't move nearly as fast as he used to. And whether by accident or design, the intruder's weapon was pointed squarely at the older man. No, better to find out what this mysterious employer wanted and wait for a better opening. "I'd hate to disappoint him," she said, lifting her hand away from her holster. "Especially after such a gracious invitation. Please, lead on."

Though if he had harmed any of the *Wild Karrde's* crew getting inside, she promised herself darkly, her cooperation would be coming to a quick end. A painfully quick end.

Fortunately for him, he hadn't.

"Sorry, Mara," Dankin apologized, looking rather sheepish as he and the rest of the crew piled out of the group of black-windowed landspeeders in which their captors had brought them here. "They got the drop on us at the hatchway."

"Don't worry about it," Mara said, glancing around as they were herded toward the side door of an ornate and well-guarded mansion. There was no indication of who the owner was or even

exactly where they were, though from the sounds of spacecraft in the distance they probably weren't more than a few kilometers from the spaceport. "Let's see what all this is about. We can always get annoyed about it later."

They were ushered through the front door, up a staircase, and along a corridor to a huge office whose luxury level left the rest of the mansion in the dust. A group of chairs had been set up facing a massive desk that looked to be nearly half the size of the *Wild Karrde's* entire bridge.

And seated behind the desk, peering at them like a meat-buyer assessing a passing herd of brualki, was a large, heavily built man. "Thank you for coming," he said, his voice penetrating the distance without giving any impression that he was even pushing the limits of his volume. "Please be seated."

"Your invitation was hard to ignore," Mara told him, choosing the chair directly in front of him and sitting down. "You might want to consider trying a more polite approach."

"If I'd had the time, I would have," the round man said, glancing over them again. "Where's Karrde?"

"He's not here," Mara said. *And not likely to bump into this meeting any time soon, either*, she added silently to herself. He was over in the Gekto system making some shipping arrangements, and wasn't due to return until tomorrow. She could only hope he wouldn't be as easily nabbed as the rest of them had been. "I'm Mara Jade, currently in command of the *Wild Karrde*. What do you want?"

The man's eyes narrowed. Mara met his gaze evenly; after a few seconds, his face cleared and he even smiled slightly. "Mara Jade: I've heard a great deal about you, young lady. Yes, you'll do nicely."

Beside Mara, Dankin stirred as if he was about to speak. Mara shot him a quick glance, and he subsided.

"Very good, indeed," the large man murmured. "Perfectly in command, both of yourself and of your people. Yes, you'll do."

He took a deep breath. “First, some introductions. My name is Ja Bardrin. Perhaps you’ve heard of me.”

Mara kept her face steady, wincing inwardly at the ripple of surprise that ran through the rest of the crew. Of course they’d heard of the industrialist—half the sector had—but that was no reason to play into this false-modesty, ego-stroking game of his. “I think I’ve noticed your name go by once or twice in a footnote,” she told him calmly. “Under weapons and ship systems, if I recall correctly. Usually dealing in market areas Uoti hasn’t gotten to yet.”

She had the small satisfaction of drawing a flash of annoyance from him on that one. The Bardrin Group and the Uoti Corporate had been jockeying for market position and prestige for over two decades now, a rivalry that was deep and bitter and showed no signs of being resolved any time soon.

Unfortunately, Bardrin’s brief flicker of anger subsided too quickly for her to use the lowered mental guard to pull any insight from his mind. “But enough of this chitchat,” she continued. “I’ll ask again: what do you want?”

Bardrin locked eyes with her. “My daughter Sansia has been captured. I want you to rescue her.”

Mara frowned. “I think your information sifters need a refresher course in how to do their job. We don’t handle military operations.”

“The mission requires a woman,” Bardrin said. “A resourceful, competent, combat-trained human female.”

“So go hire a Mistryl.”

Bardrin shook his head. “There’s no time to contact them, even if I knew how to go about it. I have to get Sansia back now, before her captors realize who it is they have.”

“What are you talking about?” Odonnl spoke up. “You said they kidnapped her.”

“I said they captured her,” Bardrin countered, pinning Odonnl into his chair with a single contemptuous glance. “Kindly pay attention.”

He brought his gaze back to Mara. “She and the SoroSuub three-thousand luxury yacht she was flying were taken by a pirate gang while in port on Makksre and given to a slaver consortium headquartered on Torpris and run by a Drach’nam named Praysh.” He lifted his eyebrows slightly. “I presume you’ve also come across *that* name in your footnote perusals.”

“Once or twice,” Mara conceded, suppressing a grimace. In the circles the *Wild Karrde* moved in, the name of Chay Praysh was even more well known than Bardrin’s. “I understand he makes the late and unlamented Jabba the Hutt look like a fine, upstanding citizen.”

“Then you understand why I want Sansia and her ship out of his hands,” Bardrin said, his voice suddenly low and with an underlying edge of desperation. “I know Karrde would have been willing to help me, but Karrde’s not here. You, Jade, must make the decision.”

“What about the authorities?” Dankin spoke up. “The Sector Patrol, or even the New Republic?”

“And have them do what?” Bardrin shot back. “Request an audience with Praysh? Mount an attack on his fortress that will leave it in ruins and everyone inside dead? Besides, their security leaks like rock sifters. If Praysh learns who Sansia is, he’ll bleed me for everything I own. And then kill her anyway.”

He looked at Mara, an almost pleading look in his eyes. “Sansia will have been sent to work in the slime pits in his fortress,” he said. “He sends all human female captives there—some deep desire to humiliate them, I presume. You’ll have to get them to take you in as another prisoner—”

“Wait a minute,” Mara cut him off. “I’ve already told you we don’t do this sort of work.”

“Then you’d better learn how quickly,” Bardrin rumbled, his earlier desperation changing abruptly into ominous threat. “There’s no time for me to get anyone else. You’re it.”

Mara crossed her arms, bringing her hand close to the tiny blaster concealed inside her left sleeve. “And if I refuse?”

"There are twenty-four blasters concealed in the walls of this room," Bardrin said. "Three trained on each of you. Before you could even pull that weapon clear, you'd watch your crewmates die around you."

Mara flicked her eyes across the room, stretching out to the Force as she did so. He was right; she could sense the alert presences hidden behind the ornately carved walls all around them.

And if she hadn't been willing to risk Chin's life earlier, she certainly wasn't going to play games with the entire *Wild Karrde's* crew now. "You didn't answer my question," she said, unfolding her arms.

"You won't refuse," Bardrin declared, leaning back in his chair. "You see, you've just now given me all the leverage I need. You'll go to Torpris and bring back Sansia and her ship ... or I'll execute your entire crew."

Someone off to her left inhaled sharply. "You can't be that stupid," Mara said, trying to put confidence she didn't feel into her tone. Through the Force she could read Bardrin's intentions, and knew he was deadly serious. "You kill Karrde's people, and Karrde will come after you. And I guarantee he's not an enemy to trifle with."

"Neither am I, my dear," Bardrin said darkly. "A contest between us might prove quite interesting."

He leveled a thick finger at her. "But regardless of the outcome, you would still have to live out your life with the knowledge that it was your obstinate stubbornness that had sent them to their deaths. I don't think that's a burden you really want to carry."

"There's no need to be quite so melodramatic," Mara said, forcing her frustration and anger deep down where it wouldn't show. To find herself being so easily manipulated was infuriating.

But she had no choice. She was Karrde's second-in-command, and she'd seen the concern and respect he consistently showed toward his people. She wasn't about to lower those high

standards, and she certainly wasn't going to risk her people's deaths by refusing Bardrin. And everyone in the room knew it. "I'll see what I can do. What can I have in the way of equipment?"

"Anything you want," Bardrin said, standing up and waving a hand. Behind them, Mara heard the doors open. "My people will escort your crewmates to their quarters, where they'll remain until you and Sansia return. You and I will go make whatever arrangements you need."

"Fine," Mara said, falling into step beside him as he passed between the entering lines of guards.

But that didn't mean the matter would end with Sansia's rescue, she promised herself silently. Not by a long shot.

Bardrin had told her that Praysh's mansion and grounds were set up near the center of one of Torpris's larger cities. He had failed to mention, however, that that particular section of the city was otherwise composed entirely of slums.

Or at least that was how it seemed to Mara as she maneuvered her landspeeder down the winding streets toward the high walls of the compound, wincing at the garbage and debris piled in alleyways between the dilapidated buildings and trying not to hit any of the ragged derelicts shuffling along the street. A dozen different species were represented here, all looking equally hopeless, and she found herself wondering how much of it was a result of Praysh's presence in the city.

Passing one final clump of huddled beings, she reached the side door she'd been told to come to. Flanking it were a pair of Drach'nam guards, looking even more massive than usual for the species in their heavy body armor. Each of them held a neuronc whip, with a holstered blaster and long knife standing ready in reserve. "Hey, there," she called cheerfully to them, eyeing the whips with the sort of contempt she reserved for unnecessarily

barbaric weapons. “I have a package here for His First Greatness Chay Praysh, a gift from the Mrahash of Kvabja. May I enter?”

There was an almost chuckle, quickly strangled off, from one of the guards. “Really,” he said, lumbering toward her. “Bring it here and let’s have a look.”

Mara slid out of the vehicle and pulled the packing cylinder from the storage compartment in back. It was large—a good meter tall and half a meter in diameter—but fairly light, most of its bulk consisting of cushioning material for the delicate floater globe she’d borrowed from Bardrin. “It’s some kind of expensive art object, I think,” she said, setting it carefully down in front of him.

“Oh, it’s that, all right,” the guard agreed, looking Mara up and down. “Just a minute.”

He went back to the door and busied himself with a comm panel built into the wall. There was a breath of movement beside Mara—

[Leave it and go,] an alien voice spoke quietly from behind her.

Mara turned. A Togorian female was standing at the rear of the landspeeder, her fur matted and dirty, clearly just another of the derelicts loitering on the street. But her yellow eyes were bright and alive, and her teeth were bared slightly toward the guards. “Excuse me?” Mara asked.

[I said leave it and go,] the alien said, mouthing the Ghi trade language words with some difficulty. [You are in great danger here.]

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Mara said, shaking her head with casual unconcern even as she wondered at the Togorian’s courage in sticking her neck out this way. Clearly, she knew or suspected what happened to human females who wandered near Praysh’s fortress; but to try to chase a potential prize out from under the slaver’s snout this way bordered on the suicidal. “I’m just delivering a present to His First Greatness, that’s all.”

The Togorian hissed. [Fool—you *are* the present,] she snarled. [Flee, while you still can.]



“Okay, we’re set,” the guard said, keying off the comm unit and walking over to Mara. She turned back to him, making sure to keep a pleasantly blank expression on her face. If he even suspected the Togorian had tried to warn her, there might be unpleasant repercussions. “You can take it right in.”

“Thank you,” Mara said, stooping to pick up the cylinder—

A gauntleted hand came down with a thunk onto the top of the package. “*After* we unpack it, of course.”

Mara felt her muscles tighten. “What do you mean?” she asked cautiously, straightening up.

The guard already had his knife out, a nasty-looking serrated weapon with a handguard consisting of a series of thick, needle-sharp spikes alternatively curving up and down from the base of the blade. “I mean we unpack it out here,” he said, digging the blade in beneath the lid. “Never can tell what someone might try to slip inside the packaging, you know.”

Mara flicked a glance over his shoulder at the second guard, a sense of things gone suddenly and terribly wrong rippling through her. Nestled in its hiding place between the inner and outer shells of the cylinder, she would have bet heavily that her lightsaber could slip through any standard weapons scan Praysh’s guards might have put the package through. But unpacking it outside the fortress was not a possibility she’d expected. “But what if you break it?” she asked anxiously.

“Don’t worry—we do this all the time,” the guard assured her. “H’sishi, I thought I told you scavengers you were supposed to stay behind the mark line.”

[Your pardon,] the Togorian said, her tone almost groveling. [I saw the shiny metal—]

“And hoped you could get first grabs, huh?” The guard finished slicing off the top and peeled away the first plate of packing foam. “Here you go, scavengers,” he called loudly, hurling the lid and the foam down the street.

Abruptly, the gathered loiterers exploded into action, diving toward the flying pieces as if they were prize jewels instead of

unwanted garbage. The guard continued digging down, throwing more foam plates into the melee, until he reached the floater globe at the center. “There it is,” he said, reaching in and carefully pulling out the globe. “Nice. Okay,” he added, handing the globe to Mara. “*Now* you can go in.”

Mara swallowed, glancing down at the cylinder as the guard continued to unload the packaging from the bottom and throw out the pieces. She looked up—

To find H’sishi’s yellow eyes steady on her. Mara felt her lip twitch; and then, to her surprise, the alien bared her teeth slightly, as if she’d found a hint she’d been searching for. There was a movement from the side, and Mara looked back just as the guard hefted the cylinder itself over his head and hurled it toward the seething, quarreling crowd.

A dozen of the derelicts abandoned their fight for the foam scraps and charged toward the spot where it would land. But H’sishi was faster. With a single leap she got under the cylinder, snatching it into her arms and hissing a warning at the two or three who tried to grab it away. Another hiss, and the crowd reluctantly fell back.

“I guess she really did want the shiny metal,” the guard said with a sneer. “Okay, human, let’s go.”

Despite the fortress’s sleek and modern exterior, the interior was dark and decidedly dank, its twisting and rough-floored corridors clearly modeled on the hiding-tunnels much prized by Drach’nam on their homeworld. Mara didn’t bother to keep track of the route as her five-guard escort took her ever deeper into the fortress, concentrating instead on evaluating Praysh’s overall defense structure and gradually increasing the level of nervousness she was displaying in her body language and infrequent attempts at conversation. Her lightsaber was going to be severely missed, but even if she’d been able to smuggle the weapon inside, she’d already concluded that the best hope of

getting out would be in Sansia's impounded ship. Fighting their way back along the tunnels and out into the grounds was not an option she was interested in trying.

Still, that lightsaber had been Luke's once, and he was going to kill her if she lost it. Hopefully, when this was all over, she'd be able to track H'sishi down and buy it back from her.

They reached Praysh's audience chamber at last, a large, high-ceilinged room that by its gloom, smells, and general repulsiveness brought back unpleasant memories of Jabba the Hutt's throne room on Tatooine. His First Greatness obviously lacked Jabba's egalitarian sensibilities, though; the only beings in the room were more of Praysh's fellow Drach'nam.

"Well, well," Praysh called, swiveling his throne around to face the incoming group. "What have we here? A present from the Mrahash of Kvabja, is it?"

"Yes, Your First Greatness," Mara said, putting a nervous quaver into her tone as she glanced surreptitiously around. There was a pair of camouflaged blaster ports in the false wall behind Praysh's throne, but other than that the only defenses were the handful of guards standing between her and the slaver chief. Unlike the door wardens, this group carried no blasters, but were armed only with the same type of long knives and neuronc whips. Probably the intent was to keep the more dangerous weapons away from rioting prisoners or slaves; still, it was an overconfidence she might well be able to exploit. "He sends you greetings and—"

"Take that bauble, someone," Praysh cut her off, waving a gem-encrusted scepter toward her. "You—human—step forward."

One of the guards took the floater globe and nudged her forward. Stretching out with all her senses, Mara walked toward the throne. Somewhere along here there would undoubtedly be a test to make sure she was nothing more than the useless slave she appeared....

She'd gone no more than three steps when it came. Abruptly, one of the guards ahead pulled his whip from his side and with a casual flick of his wrist sent the lash snaking toward her.

Mara gasped and threw her hands uselessly in front of her face, forcing back the reflex to dodge or duck or do something—anything—that would be more effective.

To her relief, the lash cracked a few centimeters short of her face. “Your First Greatness,” she gasped, taking a quick and unsteady step backward. “Please, sir—what have I done?”

The only answer was the sound of another whip from behind her. She half turned—

And suddenly the lash curled itself around her knees and a wave of pain surged through her body.

Mara screamed, an explosive sound that was only partially role-playing, as she toppled onto the floor, the whip's current arcing agonizingly through her body. She clawed once at the lash, screaming again as the current burned at her fingertips. “Please—no—please—”

“Here—defend yourself,” a voice called out, and she looked up as a small blaster landed on the floor beside her legs.

She grabbed at the weapon, forcing her fingers to fumble as if dealing with a totally unfamiliar object, clenching her teeth against the waves of pain as every part of her being screamed at her to *do* something. The blaster was undoubtedly useless, just another part of Praysh's sadistic test, but if she swiveled on one hip, swinging her legs hard around, she might at least be able to yank the whip out of her attacker's hand.

But if she did that—if she showed any sign of combat skill whatsoever—she would probably die.

And then so would the *Wild Karrde's* crew.

She got a grip on the blaster at last, bending awkwardly around to try to bring the weapon to bear on her assailant. The muzzle wavered uncontrollably, and she tried to prop her elbow on the floor to steady it, sobbing now like a child. The blaster sagged and dropped from her paralyzed fingers—

And abruptly, thankfully, the current shut off.

Mara lay there, unmoving, still sobbing through clenched teeth as she worked out the sudden cramps in her leg muscles. If she'd misjudged Praysh's intentions—if he'd decided to kill her for sport instead of putting her down in the slime pits ...

"That was an object lesson," Praysh said conversationally. There was a movement beside her, and rough fingers began unwrapping the lash from around her legs. "Now that you've seen what a neuronc whip feels like, I'm sure you won't ever want to provoke its use again."

"No—please—no," Mara managed, the words coming out mangled through her gasping sobs. A pair of hands grabbed her upper arms and hauled her up onto her feet. She took a second to confirm that her legs were recovered enough to hold her weight, then let her knees wobble and collapse again beneath her. The two Drach'nam pulled her up again and turned her to face Praysh. "Please—" she whispered.

"You belong to me now," Praysh said quietly, his colorless eyes staring at her. "Your safety—your well-being—your life—are all in my hand. If you serve well, you will survive. If not, there will be neuronc whips around you for the remainder of a short and excruciatingly painful life. Do I make myself clear?"

Mara nodded quickly, dropping her gaze and hunching her shoulders, the helpless terror of a beaten animal. "Good," Praysh said, waving off-handedly toward a different door leading out of the chamber. The show was over, and already he was bored with the performer. "Take her to the slavekeeper," he ordered. "Enjoy your new life here, human."

Halfway down a long flight of stairs her escorting guards apparently decided they'd had enough of carrying her and cut her loose to walk on her own. Aside from a lingering tingle in her muscles Mara had completely recovered, but she was careful to maintain a weak-kneed stagger for their benefit the rest of the way down. Neuronc whips were the ultimate glorification of savagery and degradation, just the sort of thing Praysh's thugs

would use as their primary persuader, and she had no intention of letting them know how fast she could recover from their effects.

The slime pits were in the lowest level of the fortress, composed of a series of interconnected trenches about two meters wide and a hundred meters long set into the floor. On the walkways between them strolled the Drach'nam guards, idly fingering their whips or playing with the hilts of their knives. Perhaps two hundred women, most of them young looking, slogged slowly through the waist-deep gray muck in the pits, bent over double with their arms dug into the slime, their faces bare centimeters above the surface. All those Mara could see wore identical expressions of blank hopelessness that sent a shiver through her.

"I'll explain it just once," the slave keeper said, gesturing almost genially toward the pits. "The nutrient slime in there is home to the pupal form of the krizar creatures His First Greatness uses to patrol the grounds. The pupae are hard-shelled and ellipsoid, about the size of one of your pathetic little thumbs. Your job is to find the ones that are starting to break out of their shells and put them up on the walkway where they'll be retrieved and moved to the main hatchery."

"How do I know when they're ready—?"

"You'll know when they're ready when they start to wiggle and chew their way out," the slavekeeper cut her off sharply. A couple of heads turned at the sudden harsh tone; most of the women didn't even bother to look up. "And don't try just pulling out every one you find. If the pupae are out too long before they're ready, they'll die."

He waved his whip in front of her nose. "And dead pupae make us *very* unhappy. Understood?"

Mara swallowed, forcing herself to shrink back from him. "Yes, sir," she murmured.

"Good," the slavekeeper said, his tone back to genial again, a being who clearly enjoyed his work. "Your head fur is an

interesting shade of color. It will be of no use to you in the pits; perhaps you would like to sell it to me.”

“In exchange for what?” Mara asked cautiously.

“Favors. More food, perhaps, or other kindnesses.”

Mara fought back a grimace. The thought of her hair hanging from a slavekeeper’s trophy wall was utterly abhorrent. But on the other hand, he could probably take it without any payment at all if he chose. Hopefully, she wouldn’t be here long enough for him to get around to that. “Can I think about it?” she asked timidly.

He shrugged. Clearly, this was just a game to help him pass the time. “If you wish. Oh, one more thing. If you *don’t* get the pupae out fast enough, they’ll start digging through the shells on their own. No problem with that; except that their mouth palps are always the first things that come out. If they get those into your skin, you’ll need a trip to the med facility to get it taken off.”

“Oh,” Mara said in a small voice. Now, *that* was very useful information. “Does it hurt?”

He gave her one of those evil smiles that Drach’nam did so well. “No more than the whip. Now get in there.”

Mara looked down at her jumpsuit. “But—”

She didn’t even get a chance to finish her protest. Putting a massive arm around the back of her waist, the slavekeeper swept her off the walkway into the nearest of the trenches.

She managed to hang on to her balance as she landed, keeping her head and most of her torso up out of the slime. But the impact sent a wave of thick muck splashing outward at the nearest workers. “Sorry,” she apologized.

One of the women looked up at her, a dab of the slime oozing slowly down her cheek. “Don’t worry about it,” she said in a voice that sounded more dead than alive. “Don’t worry about getting dirty, either. You’ll never be clean again.”

A neuronc whip cracked warningly overhead. Mara shied back, but the other woman didn’t seem to notice or care as she

dug into the slime again. Stomach twisting with revulsion, Mara eased her arms into the muck and got to work.

It took her three hours of nauseating, backbreaking sifting before her search pattern finally paid off. “Your name Sansia?” she asked quietly as she came up beside the woman whose holo Bardrin had showed her earlier.

The other woman looked up at her, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Yes,” she acknowledged warily. “What about it?”

Mara glanced casually around. None of the Drach’nam were in earshot at the moment. “A close relative of yours asked me to get you out of here.”

She’d expected elation, or barely contained joy, or at least a certain amount of surprise. But Sansia’s reaction wasn’t any of those. “Did he really?” she said, her voice dark and scornful. “How very kind of him.”

Mara frowned. “You don’t seem very pleased.”

“Oh, I’m overjoyed,” Sansia said sarcastically. “The joy is merely tempered by a somewhat cynical disbelief. You’re what, some kind of mercenary?”

“Not exactly,” Mara said. “Disbelief in what?”

“In Daddy dear’s motivations,” Sansia said, digging down into the slime. “Let me guess. He told you about my terrible plight, and how important I am to him and the business, and that he would do anything and give anything to get me back. Once you were properly teary-eyed, he turned up the heat and either talked, maneuvered, or bribed you into charging here to my rescue. Right so far?”

“Close enough,” Mara said cautiously.

Sansia’s hand came out of the slime holding one of the krizar pupae. She glanced at both the long ends, then tossed it back in behind her. “But though he desperately wanted his darling daughter back, he also made it clear—subtly, of course—that he wanted the ship back even more. In fact, he probably gave you



all the access and command codes you'd need to get it flying whether I was with you or not. Am I still right?"

Mara felt her throat tighten. "He said I needed to be able to fly the ship if you were incapacitated during the escape."

Sansia snorted. "That sounds like him. Plausible straight to the top, but phony as Imperial confidence. The fact is, merc, that he doesn't care about me one single bit. If he did, he wouldn't have sent me to Makksre on that half-daft run in the first place. He wants the *Winning Gamble* back, pure and simple."

Mara glanced around again. One of the guards across the way was eyeing her, and she dug her arms again into the slime. "What's so special about the ship?"

"Oh, it's just about three levels past state-of-the-art, that's all," Sansia said bitterly. "It's got an incredible flight system, an unbelievable weapons targeting array, and a crazy, one-of-a-kind defensive shoot-back system I think Daddy must have stolen from somewhere."

Mara studied her face, stretching out with the Force to try to get a feel for her mind. The same bitterness she could hear in Sansia's voice was indeed roiling through her emotions. "So what are you saying?" she asked. "That you don't want me to try to get you out of here?"

Sansia's eyes slunk away from Mara's gaze. "I'm just telling you how it is," she muttered. "Maybe warning you that somewhere along the line he's probably going to try to force your hand. Try to get you to run without me. I guess I thought you should be ready for that."

And was hoping against hope that, unlike her father, her rescuer had a conscience? "Thanks for the warning," Mara said. Her fingers touched something hard in the slime: one of the elusive krizar pupae. "It just means we'll need to move up the timetable a little," she added, pulling the pupa to just above the surface where she could examine it. The entire shell was solid; clearly, this one wouldn't be poking its jaws out any time soon. Perfect. "Where will they take us after we're finished here?"

“Across the hall to a really disgusting barracks-style sleeping room,” Sansia said. For the first time since their conversation began Mara could sense the faint whisperings of cautious hope in the other woman’s voice and emotions. “They’ll let us wash up, then feed us.”

“Showers or tubs?”

“More like animal watering troughs than real tubs,” Sansia said contemptuously. “Once they bring you down here, you’re never clean again.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” Mara said. “All the more reason not to hang around any longer than we have to. Are there surveillance cams in the room?”

“There are a couple of obvious ones near the door. Probably a whole bunch of non-obvious ones hidden around, too.”

“Okay,” Mara said. “One more question: how long to the shift change?”

Sansia peered across the room at a set of glowing emblems embedded in the wall. “Not long. Maybe ten minutes.”

“Good,” Mara said. “I have a couple of things to pick up first, so I’ll catch up with you in the sleeping room. Get washed up fast, and be ready to move as soon as I get back.”

Sansia was eyeing her suspiciously, but she nodded. “I’ll be ready,” she said. “Good luck.”

Mara nodded and moved on, holding the krizar shell she’d found beneath the surface as she slogged along, wanting to put a little distance between her and Sansia before she made her move. Out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the Drach’nam walking purposefully down the walkway toward her, flicking his whip into the air as he came, no doubt preparing a comment and object lesson about idle chat while on duty. Mara let him get almost within whip range ...

And with the most spine-curling scream she could muster, she swung her left arm up, clutching the forearm with her right hand. “It’s got me!” she yelled, flailing around and sending bits of

slime flying through the air all around her. “Get it off—get it off!”

The Drach’nam reached the edge of her trench in a single bound. “Get your hand out of the way,” he snapped, leaning precariously over her as he caught her left wrist and hauled her bodily up out of the pit. The movement brought her up against his belted knife, and she winced as the needle-sharp spikes of the handguard dug briefly into her ribs. “I said move it,” he repeated, dropping her onto her feet on the walkway and prying her right hand away from its grip.

To reveal the krizar shell hanging from the underside of her left arm.

Or at least, that was what Mara hoped it looked like. Her Force-manipulating skills might not be as good as Luke Skywalker’s, but it was no big trick to use the Force to hold the shell pressed firmly against her arm as if the creature inside were hanging on. The only danger was that the guard might brush off the glob of slime strategically placed at the intersection point and notice that there were no krizar palps linking the shell to the arm.

But after all the times this had undoubtedly happened, the guard was clearly uninterested in the details. “Got one there, all right,” he growled, shifting his grip to her right hand and pulling her along the walkway toward the door. “Hey! Your Seventh Greatness?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” the slavekeeper told him, gesturing the guards flanking the door to open it. “Tell Blath to be careful this time—His First Greatness isn’t going to like it if he loses another one.”

The door opened. A second Drach’nam stepped to Mara’s left side as they headed out, taking her left arm and holding it in an iron grip at the level of her waist—probably, Mara decided, making sure she didn’t knock the krizar off against her side. The door slammed shut, and the three of them headed at a fast walk down the corridor.

Mara didn't know where the med facility was, but odds were it wasn't very far away, which meant she had to move fast. She continued to moan and cry like a helpless and broken slave as the Drach'nam half dragged her along, struggling ineffectually in her supposed pain against the casually unbreakable grips of her two escorts. Under cover of her attempted flailings, she glanced down to her left. The second guard's knife was bouncing along only a few centimeters from where he was holding her left arm pinioned.

And here was going to be the riskiest part of her plan. With both of her arms under their control, the two Drach'nam wouldn't be expecting any trouble from her and should therefore be less watchful than they might be otherwise. But if that assumption proved false, there was going to be some serious and immediate trouble.

But there was nothing for it but to try. Stretching out to the Force, she slid the knife partially out of its sheath, monitoring the alien's mind closely to see if he would notice the sudden change in weight at his belt. Carefully, trying not to jar the weapon, she eased the spiked handguard up against her left forearm near the spot where she was still holding the krizar pupa in place. Two quick jabs—two stabs of genuine pain against the backdrop of her agony act—and she eased the knife down into its sheath again.

Just in time. The knife was barely back in place when the guard on her right brought her to a halt at a side door, shoving the panel open with his free hand. Shifting her attention to the krizar pupa riding her arm, Mara sent it spinning away down the dingy corridor ahead of them.

After the darkness everywhere else inside the fortress, the medical facility was something of a surprise: bright, clean, and reasonably well equipped, with a tiled floor and even some sections of wood paneling. And the reason for the altered decor was immediately apparent: the medic wasn't a Drach'nam.

“Sit down,” a tired-looking Bith in a slightly shabby medic’s tunic said, coming around a desk and gesturing them to the room’s lone treatment table. His tone was brisk, but his face and hands betrayed the edge of nervousness that Mara suspected was probably a common condition among non-Drach’nam in Praysh’s employ. “Where is the pupa?”

The guard on Mara’s left lifted her arm. “It’s right—oh, *pustina*. It’s gone!”

“It must have fallen off,” the Bith said, the tension in his voice suddenly jumping sharply. His eyes flicked guiltily toward the wall to the left—“You *two* had better go see if you can find it.”

The two guards didn’t argue, but charged immediately back out into the corridor. “Did you notice it fall off?” the Bith asked, turning Mara’s arm over and starting to clean the residual slime away.

“No, I didn’t,” Mara said, putting some whining fear into her voice as she looked past the medic’s large head. Through an open doorway in the back of the treatment room she could see a large supply cabinet. Stretching out to the Force, she eased the transparisteel cabinet doors open a few millimeters. The labels on the vials were too far away to read, but if the colors and bottle shapes followed conventional New Republic pharmaceutical standards, the three she was looking for were there. Lifting one of the vials off its shelf, she slid it quickly down along the wall to the floor. There was no way to know where the surveillance cam back there was located, but there was nothing she could do about it from out here anyway. She could only hope the bottle’s sudden movement wouldn’t be noticed by whoever His First Greatness had monitoring the spy displays. Getting a grip on the second bottle, she lowered it to the floor beside the first ...

“Odd,” the Bith said. He had that section of her arm clean now and was peering at the two puncture marks she’d made with the guard’s knife. “These don’t look like krizar palpal indentations at all. Are you certain that was what grabbed you?”

"I don't know," Mara moaned, moving the last of the three vials to the floor and then snagging a couple of small squeeze bottles and adding them to her collection. "All I know is that it hurt. It hurt a lot."

She could sense the sympathy and frustration in the Bith. "Yes, I know," he murmured. "It is not an easy life for you down here."

"No," she said, half sobbing as she moved her prizes across the floor to the examination room doorway. Whoever was on surveillance duty might reasonably be expected to ignore an empty supply room, but a room occupied by a human slave and Bith medic was another matter entirely. She had to take out the surveillance cam in here before she could bring the bottles the rest of the way to her.

"Ow!" she gasped suddenly, half pulling her left arm out of the Bith's grip as she quickly studied the wall he'd glanced at earlier. The cam, clearly designed to be hidden, was fairly obvious to someone of Mara's training and experience: a small lens masquerading as a knot hole in the wooden paneling.

"I am sorry," the Bith said, and she caught his mixture of concern and puzzlement as he immediately eased his grip on her arm. "There should not be anything where I was touching that should hurt."

"Well, it did," Mara said petulantly. With the fingers of her right hand, she surreptitiously dug a wad of slime from the hardening mass caking her legs. "They were whipping me earlier up in that big open place—*om!*" She snatched her left arm away from him again, flailing this time with her right as well. The motion sent a half-dozen small globs of slime spinning across the room—

And with a little help from her Force abilities, the largest of the globs splattered into the wall squarely over the hidden surveillance cam.

"Again, I am sorry," the Bith said, glancing over at the wall. He took a second look, his whole body stiffening suddenly as he

realized what had happened. "Excuse me," he said, grabbing up a towel and hurrying over to the wall.

And with the cam still covered, and the medic's attention elsewhere, Mara brought her vials and squeeze bottles flying across from the doorway and dropped them smoothly down the front of her jumpsuit. By the time the Bith finished his cleanup job, they were safely nestled in the folds of material at her waist.

"My apologies," he said as he put the towel in the disposal and returned to her. "The nutrient can damage the wall material, you see, which His First Greatness was kind enough to allow me."

And he would be in serious trouble if he allowed the cam to stay covered too long? Probably. "It's okay," Mara muttered.

Once again, she was just in time. The Bith had just taken her arm again when the two Drach'nam guards clumped back into the room. "Nothing," one of them snarled, glaring suspiciously at Mara. "What did you do with it? Well?"

Mara shrank away from him. "Nothing," she said, her voice frightened and pleading. "Please—I didn't do anything."

"Then where is it?" the Drach'nam demanded, taking a threatening step toward her, neuronc whip in hand.

"Perhaps it was a krizar which was still immature," the Bith spoke up, holding a hand up protectively between Mara and the guard. "Its grip was weak and not completely firm."

"Then where is it now?" the second guard put in. "It was attached to her—I saw it."

"If it's not in the corridor, it must still be in the growth room," the Bith said reasonably. "Perhaps it fell off again into the nutrient pits."

The guards continued to glare, and Mara held her breath. If either of them had actually looked at the pupa after they left the room ...

But apparently neither of them had. "Yeah," the guard said with ill grace. "Maybe."

The Bith glanced at a wall chrono. "At any rate, the work shift is over," he said. "Why not escort her back to the communal, and then you can search the walkways in the growth room."

"Don't tell us our job, Bith," the other guard growled, baring his teeth as he grabbed Mara's arm in a none-too-gentle grip. "Come on, human. Time for your slops."

The mass sleeping/eating/cleanup room Sansia had spoken about was directly across the corridor from the slime pits. It was also fully as disgusting as her tone had led Mara to expect. About half of the woman had finished their cleaning by the time Mara arrived, leaving the liquid in the long troughs looking more like a runnier version of the slime than anything resembling water. Mara joined the crowd of women waiting their turn, and under cover of the bodies pressing around her, she worked the vials out of her jumpsuit and confirmed that they did indeed contain the chemicals she wanted. Once again, the comprehensive saboteur training the Emperor had given her so long ago was going to come in handy.

"I thought you were kidding about going to pick up some things." Sansia's voice came softly from behind her shoulder, too low for any of the other women around them to hear. "Where did you get those?"

"Medic supply cabinet," Mara told her, concentrating on the task of pouring the first vial into one of the squeeze bottles, keeping them both at waist height where the activity would be shielded from prying eyes.

Sansia made a sound in the back of her throat. "I suppose it's too late to mention this, but the med facility probably has surveillance cams, too."

"I know," Mara said. "Don't worry, I took care of it. Here, hold these."

She passed over the empty vial and full squeeze bottle, giving Sansia a quick once-over as she did. Despite the other woman's



efforts to clean up, her hair and clothing were still badly streaked and stained with the slime she'd spent the day in. Whatever Praysh's reasons for hating human females, Mara decided darkly, he'd honed his campaign of degradation to a fine edge.

"I didn't think you were going to come back," Sansia said, her voice sounding a little odd as Mara began filling the second squeeze bottle from one of her other vials. "I'm glad I was wrong."

"I'm used to being underestimated," Mara assured her. "You think you can find your way to where your ship's being kept?"

"As I would the road back home from an execution ground," Sansia said feelingly.

"Good. Describe the route for me."

Even without looking she could sense the sudden tension in Sansia's mind and body. "Why do you need to know?" the other woman asked cautiously. "We're going to be together, right?"

"We could get separated," Mara pointed out patiently. "Or you could be hurt or otherwise incapacitated. I don't want to have to lug you around and look for the way out at the same time."

There was a short pause. "I suppose that makes sense," Sansia conceded reluctantly at last. "Okay. You head out the door over there and turn right ..."

She went through the whole route, describing each turn and intersection in precise terms. Clearly, the woman had an eye for detail. By the time she finished, the second squeeze bottle was full.

And they were ready. "Okay," Mara said, handing Sansia the second empty vial and taking the full squeeze bottle back from her. "Ditch those empties somewhere out of sight and then move over toward the door. You ever have fire drills in here?"

Sansia blinked. "Not since I arrived, no."

"Well, you're going to have one now," Mara said. "When the Drach'nam come barging in, make sure you don't get run over. Other than that, just wait near the door until I come for you."

"Understood." Sansia took a deep breath. "Good luck."

She moved away from Mara, easing gingerly through the press of still slime-covered women. Mara stayed with the crowd, moving slowly forward as places at the trough opened up, running through a slow mental countdown and wondering if she could risk cleaning up a bit herself before they made their break. Probably shouldn't take the time, she reluctantly decided. The Bith would notice the missing vials the first time he looked into the supply cabinet, and he'd probably be as quick to report the loss as he'd been to scrape the slime off the surveillance cam.

The last woman in front of her moved away, and Mara was finally in position. Palming her last full vial, she stepped to the trough, and, with a smooth wave of her arm, she poured its contents into the filthy water.

And with an angry hiss, the trough abruptly erupted with a sizzle of flame and a cloud of yellow smoke.

There were a half-dozen piercing screams as women whose minds had been systematically reduced to near-catatonia woke up enough to claw their way back from this sudden and inexplicable danger. The smoke continued to billow up and out, and within seconds the room was impossible to see across. There were more screams and shouts, the thudding of feet and colliding bodies, as a sudden panic gripped women who had nearly lost the ability to feel emotion of any sort. There was no place to go, no place to hide, and they all knew it.

Praysh's guards were faster on the uptake than Mara had expected them to be. She was barely halfway to the door, pushing her way through the chaos, when the heavy panel slammed in and a dozen of the Drach'nam thundered into the room. Mara caught a glimpse of heavy extinguisher canisters as they passed her on their way to the smoking trough—

And then she'd made it to the door, and Sansia was at her side. "What did you do?" the other woman hissed.

"Just a little chemical diversion," Mara said, peering through the smoke at the doorway. Not all the guards had charged to the rescue of Praysh's precious slave laborers: two of them were

blocking the corridor just outside the room, neuronic whips held ready for any attempt by the slaves to take advantage of the confusion. “Stay behind me,” she added, getting one of her squeeze bottles in each hand and stepping out the door.

One of the guards snorted at this slim human female apparently challenging them. “Where do you think *you’re*—?”

He never got to finish his question. Raising her hands, Mara squeezed a shot of liquid from one of her bottles into each of the guards’ faces. They sputtered, lunging forward even as they tried to turn away from the stream of spattering fluid. Crossing her wrists, Mara switched aim and gave each guard’s face a dose from the other bottle—

And with howls that shook the corridor, both Drach’nam dropped their whips and staggered back away from the women, hands clutching at their faces.

“Come on,” Mara snapped to Sansia. Ducking between the Drach’nam, she snatched up one of the fallen whips and headed at a dead run down the corridor.

She reached a cross corridor just as another pair of Drach’nam came around it. Gaping, they grabbed for their whips, but before they could get them into position, Mara’s lash snaked out, wrapping around both of their necks. They bellowed almost as loudly as the last pair had as they fell into a tangle of arms and legs onto the stone floor. Mara plucked a replacement whip from one of their hands, and continued past.

“This way,” Sansia called, in the lead now. “At the next corridor we turn right up the stairs—”

“Stop them!” a voice bellowed from behind them. Mara glanced back over her shoulder, her senses tingling with sudden danger—

And ahead of her, Sansia screamed.

Mara twisted back around, her whip already in motion. Two Drach’nam had appeared from ambush out of doors on opposite sides of the corridor, both their whips now wrapped around a violently twitching Sansia.

Mara snapped her whip at the attacker on the left, catching him a glancing blow across shoulder and back as he ducked away. He snarled something vicious as the current shot briefly through him, but he managed to keep his grip on his own whip. Mara brought the lash back over her shoulder and sent it toward the other Drach'nam—

And then, without warning, the weapon abruptly seemed to catch in midair, the sudden loss of momentum nearly yanking it out of her hand. A movement above her caught her eye, and she looked up.

To see that the rocky ceiling overhead had vanished, replaced by a forest of thick, multi-barbed spines pointing down toward her. Her lash had hung up on them, hopelessly entangled among the barbs.

"Foolish human," Praysh's voice purred from some hidden speaker amid the thicket. "You didn't really think I would rely solely on neuronics whips and Drach'nam muscle to keep my slaves in line, did you?"

Mara ignored him, heading toward the two guards still pinioning Sansia in place between them. With their whips locked around her, they had only their knives left in reserve....

"Stop," Praysh ordered, all the levity gone from his voice. "I don't particularly want to kill you, human, but I will if you force my hand."

Mara kept going. Both guards had their knives out now, and had half turned to point them at the suicidal human charging toward her death. Mara stretched out toward the blades with the Force, preparing to twist them aside at just the right moment—

And then, behind her two opponents, the corridor was suddenly filling with Drach'nam.

Mara came to a reluctant stop, the sour taste of defeat in her mouth. Force skills or not, Imperial combat training or not, there was no way she could take on the entire garrison by herself. Not here, not now. "I'm willing to make a deal," she called toward the ceiling.

"I'm sure you are," Praysh said, purring again. "Guards: release the second woman and bring them both to my audience chamber. I have some questions I want to ask our scrappy little fighter."

With Sansia still suffering from the partial muscular paralysis brought on by the neuronc whip, their progress up the stairway and along the stony corridors was decidedly slow. Mara supported the other woman as they walked, the guards glowering around them the whole way. Several times Mara asked for their help in carrying the injured woman, requests that went ignored.

Which was, of course, precisely the response—or lack of it—that she'd hoped for. With the task of supporting Sansia falling totally on her, she was able to adjust the timing and stall off their arrival at Praysh's audience chamber until Sansia was mostly recovered from her ordeal. Any fresh escape attempt they were able to make, after all, would be considerably simplified if they were each able to do their own running.

It was quickly clear, though, that Praysh had no intention of making any such attempts easy for them. From the number of Drach'nam lined up against the walls or standing in a protective ring around Praysh's throne, it looked like His First Greatness had half his garrison in here. "Looks like you're having a party," Mara commented as she and Sansia were led to within a couple of meters of the inner guard ring. "Are you that afraid of us?"

"Oh, the guards are merely here in hopes you'll give them an excuse to avenge what you did to Brok and Czic outside the slave quarters," Praysh said offhandedly. "I'm curious: where did you obtain the acid you sprayed into their faces?"

"I borrowed the ingredients from your dispensary," Mara told him. There was no point in deflecting the question; if they hadn't noticed the thefts yet, they would soon enough. "It's just a matter of knowing which chemicals to mix."

"Interesting," Praysh said, leaning back in his throne and regarding Mara with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

“Hardly the sort of knowledge a slave sent by the Mrahash of Kvabja should be expected to have.”

He shrugged elaborately. “But of course, that’s an irrelevant comment, isn’t it? Given that you weren’t sent by the Mrahash of Kvabja.”

Mara felt her throat tighten. Bardrin had assured her that the Mrahash was currently out of the sector, and that there was no way Praysh could check out her cover story. “Of course he sent me,” she said, stretching out to the alien’s mind, trying to figure out if this was some kind of trick.

“Spare me your lies,” Praysh said, his voice suddenly harsh. And no, there was no trickery in his thoughts. “I have a communication from the Mrahash himself, saying he’s never heard of you. In fact, I was just about to send for you when you made your pitiful escape effort.”

“I told you Daddy would try to force you to leave without me,” Sansia murmured.

A whip cracked from the side, and Sansia jerked, inhaling sharply in pain. Mara glanced at her, saw the bright streak of blood across her cheek. “If you have something to say, you will say it to me,” Praysh said coldly. “And you will start by telling me who you are and exactly why you’re here.”

“And if I don’t?” Mara asked.

Praysh’s gaze shifted to Sansia. “We’ll start the persuasion with your friend here. I don’t think you want to hear the details.”

Mara looked around the room, searching for a chink—any chink—in Praysh’s defenses. But there wasn’t one. About all she could do now was refuse to talk and hope there would be fewer guards to deal with in whatever torture chamber they took her and Sansia to.

Unless they didn’t plan to let her watch. Or, worse, let her watch on a monitor from a different location entirely. That would mean letting them put Sansia under a knife....

A quarter of the way across the room, one of the guards at the chamber’s main entrance door abruptly stepped forward, a

comlink in his hand. “Your First Greatness, a word if I may,” he called toward the throne. “I’ve just received word that there is new evidence of who this spy is.”

“Excellent,” Praysh said, swiveling his throne around to face that direction. “Bring it to me.”

The guard spoke into the comlink, and the door opened to reveal two more Drach’nam and H’sishi, the Togorian scavenger Mara had met briefly outside the palace wall. Clutched in H’sishi’s hands was a section of the packing cylinder Bardrin’s floater globe had been in.

The section that had had Mara’s lightsaber concealed in it.

Mara clenched her hands tightly as the trio marched through the assembled guards toward the throne. Any chance she and Sansia might have of escaping was going to depend heavily on the fact that Praysh didn’t know about her Force abilities. If H’sishi showed the lightsaber to him, that advantage would vanish in that same heartbeat. She had to make her move before that happened.

But there was still no chance. A Drach’nam on either side of her, more of them crowding the room, the packing cylinder section too far away for her to rip out the inner lining and get the lightsaber out ...

“Who is this?” Praysh demanded.

“A scavenger from the street,” one of the guards said. “This is a section of the packing cylinder which the human brought your gift in.” He reached over to take the cylinder section from H’sishi—

The Togorian pulled it away from him. [It is mine to show,] she hissed. [My discovery. My reward.]

“Just let her bring it,” Praysh said, gesturing impatiently. “Show me this supposed evidence.”

Deliberately, Mara thought, H’sishi looked over at the two women. Then, stepping through the inner ring of guards, she held the cylinder section up in front of Praysh. [You see here,]

she said, pointing a claw to the bottom. [It is the marking seal of the Uoti Corporate.]

“What?” Sansia muttered as Praysh leaned close to look, and Mara could sense her sudden confusion and suspicion. If her would-be rescuer was actually from their Uoti competitors instead of from her father—

“Quiet,” Mara muttered back, frowning in some confusion of her own. There hadn’t been any marking seals on the cylinder—she’d made sure of that. Had the Togorian mixed her cylinder up with some other piece of garbage?

“That is indeed the Uoti symbol,” Praysh agreed, taking the section from H’sishi and turning his gaze on Mara again. “So that’s what this is all about, is it? Uoti wants their new toys back.”

Mara didn’t reply, her eyes on H’sishi as she tried to figure out what was going on. But the Togorian’s expression was totally unreadable.

“Yes, that must be it,” Praysh decided. “And I suppose I should have expected this. I must congratulate you on your speed and efficiency in locating me—it’s been, what, only a week since that particular acquisition?”

“Yet perhaps the efficiency is only an illusion, Your First Greatness,” one of the Drach’nam spoke up, eyeing H’sishi suspiciously. “Recall that all the packing from the Uoti acquisition was similarly thrown to the scavengers. This alien could have obtained one of the marking seals and transferred it to this cylinder.”

“No,” Praysh told him. “The seal has the proper edge engraving carved into the metal around it. It’s genuine.”

He gave Mara a smile that sent an involuntary shiver down her back. “Besides, why else would a warrior of such skill deliberately step beneath my hand as she has?”

Mara looked back at H’sishi. The Togorian was gazing back at her now, and as their eyes met, she lifted a hand to casually rub at her neck, stretching her claws a little further from the ends of her fingers as she did so. Was she trying to show Mara how she’d



faked the edge engraving? Or was there some other message there?

And suddenly, Mara got it.

"I don't know what kind of trick this is supposed to be, Your First Greatness," she called, putting an edge of scorn into her voice. "But it's a pretty feeble one. I can tell from here that's not part of the cylinder I brought."

Praysh face darkened. "Can you really," he rumbled. "What remarkably good eyes. Or what a remarkable wretched memory. Perhaps that memory needs some encouragement."

[Perhaps a closer look at it would help, Your First Greatness,] H'sishi suggested.

"I think not," Praysh bit out. "The preliminary games are over. She's refused to play." He glared at Mara. "Your last chance, warrior, to do this the easy way."

H'sishi glanced at Mara, her expression suddenly looking stricken. Mara lifted her eyebrows, nodding fractionally toward the cylinder.... [May I have the cylinder section back, Your First Greatness?] the Togorian asked.

"When I'm done with it," Praysh said shortly, his attention still on Mara. "No? Very well, then. Guards—"

And abruptly, H'sishi leaped up to the throne in front of him. Slashing her claws across the faces of the two bodyguards flanking Praysh, she snatched the cylinder section from his hands, slammed it across his head hard enough to stun, and reached her hand in to the inner lining. Above the roar of multiple Drach'nam bellows came the screech of tearing metal; and just as the inner ring of guards reached H'sishi and threw themselves on top of her, she flicked her wrist over their heads—

And Mara's lightsaber came spinning across the room toward her.

There was a warning shout from someone; but it was already far too late. Mara grabbed the weapon in an iron Force grip, yanking it through the Drach'nam hands trying to slap it out of the air. "Down!" she barked to Sansia as she caught and ignited

the weapon, in the same motion cutting down the two guards flanking her.

And the entire audience chamber collapsed into pandemonium.

The nearest of the Drach'nam, too close to use their whips against her, went for their knives instead. They died holding them. Those further back lived a little longer, but not much. With no time to organize, too densely packed together for efficient use of their whips, and facing a weapon that could cut through the lashes with ease, they had no chance at all. Mara slashed through their ranks like a mowing machine, littering the rocky ground behind her with their bodies, a haze of righteous fury clouding her vision. Retribution for Sansia and the other degraded women in the slave pits; retribution for piracy and robbery and cold-hearted murder; retribution for the danger they'd put the *Wild Karrde's* crew in—

And suddenly, or so it seemed, it was over.

She stood in the middle of the room, lightsaber held high, gasping hard with her exertion. All around her were piles of Drach'nam bodies—

[I would not have believed it.]

Mara spun around. H'sishi was pressed against the wall behind the throne, staring at Mara with an expression of stunned disbelief, a half-dozen oozing wounds scattered across the matted fur of her face and torso. “How badly are you hurt?” Mara called, crossing the room toward her. None of the injuries looked serious, but she wasn't familiar enough with Togorian physiology to know for sure.

[Not badly,] H'sishi assured her. [They lost interest in me very quickly.]

“Lucky for me they did,” Mara said grimly, focusing on the false wall behind H'sishi, the wall containing the two hidden blaster ports she'd spotted on her first trip through the chamber.

Only now there was a second hole, knife-blade-sized, just beneath each of the ports. And gripped in H'sishi's hand was an

appropriated Drach'nam knife, its blade stained with the pale pink of Drach'nam blood.

"Thank you," Mara said, gesturing to the wall. "I wondered why they never fired at me."

[They never had time,] H'sishi said simply.

"I see that. Thank you. What about Praysh?"

[I believe he escaped,] H'sishi said. [Along with many of his guards. But we must hurry—your companion is already gone.]

"What?" Mara demanded, looking around again. Sansia was gone, all right. "Did Praysh take her?"

[No, she left alone, by that door.] H'sishi pointed.

Heading for her ship, no doubt, all set to take off and leave Mara and H'sishi stranded here. "Blast it," Mara snarled. "Come on."

The corridors, not surprisingly, were deserted. Mara led the way, lightsaber in hand, silently berating herself for not expecting a last-minute back-blading like this in the first place. Like father, like daughter ...

And then, almost before she was ready for it, they pushed open one final door and stumbled into an open courtyard filled with yachts, small freighters, and rows of deadly, spine-winged starfighters. Midway across the yard, a single ship was just lifting off into the air.

A SoroSuub 3000 luxury yacht.

[Is that her?] H'sishi asked.

"Yes," Mara said sourly. Like father, like daughter, all right.

But there was no time now for the luxury of anger. "We'd better find a way out of here before Praysh gets what's left of his thugs organized," she told H'sishi. "Let's see if any of these other ships are unlocked—"

She paused, frowning. The yacht, contrary to her expectations, wasn't heading for the sky as fast as Sansia could push it. Instead, it had moved on repulso-lifts to a hovering position a few meters over the center of the courtyard.

And even as Mara wondered what in the worlds Sansia was doing, a pair of turbolaser blasts blazed outward from the underside of the craft into one of the parked starfighters, blowing it into a violent yellow fireball.

H'sishi snarled something Mara didn't catch over the roar of the flames. Still firing, the yacht swiveled slowly around in a circle, methodically turning the rest of Praysh's potential pursuit craft into scrap metal. Then, maneuvering across to where Mara and H'sishi stood, it dropped again to the ground and the hatch popped open. "I thought you two would never show up," Sansia's voice called impatiently from the direction of the bridge. "Come on, let's get out of here."

The guards who'd been watching the outside of Bardrin's mansion during Mara's first visit were nowhere to be seen as she and Sansia parked their landspeeder and headed inside.

And, as it turned out, for good reason.

"Welcome back, Mara," Karrde said, rising from his chair beside Bardrin's massive desk as Mara and Sansia entered. He was smiling, but Mara could sense the icy anger simmering beneath the pleasant expression. "Excellent timing, as always. We've just secured the mansion, and I was about to start putting together an attack force to come after you." He half bowed to Sansia. "You must be Sansia Bardrin. Welcome home, as well."

"Thank you," Sansia said, nodding back. "I'm impressed—the people who designed this little fortress for my father claimed it would be impossible for anyone to take it. Not intact, at least."

"I had some professional assistance." Karrde looked at Bardrin, seated in glowering silence behind his desk. "As well as considerable motivation. You may want to explain to your father later that playing games with my people this way is not a way to maintain a long and healthy life."

"Don't worry," Sansia promised darkly. "He and I have a great deal to talk about. Starting with his willingness to leave me to rot

in Praysh's slime pits as long as he got his precious Winning Gamble back."

"You wouldn't have been there more than another six hours," Bardrin rumbled. "I already had a team assembled to come in after you."

"Through Praysh's outer defenses?" Sansia snorted. "They'd have been cut to ribbons before they even hit atmosphere."

Mara cleared her throat. "Actually, I think you'll find he's been even more devious than you thought," she said, stretching out with the Force to Bardrin's mind. She had most of the pieces now, but his emotional reactions would help confirm she was putting them together in the right order. "I think he set you up deliberately to be captured by those pirates, knowing they'd send you and the *Winning Gamble* straight to Praysh."

Sansia frowned at her. "You can't be serious. What would he gain by that?"

Mara smiled tightly at Bardrin. "Some brand-new, high-tech prototypes Praysh stole from the Uoti Corporate."

Bardrin's expression remained solidly under control, but his *guilty* mental twitch was all the confirmation Mara needed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he growled.

"But continue anyway," Karrde invited, a sly smile touching his lips. Mara had been with him long enough, she knew, for him to recognize that she never used this tone of voice when she was just guessing. "This is most interesting."

Mara looked at Sansia. "You remember that Praysh mentioned it had only been a week since the Uoti theft. Your father heard about it and decided to steal it from them before Uoti could get organized to retrieve it themselves. He knew that when the pirates gave you to Praysh they'd also give him the *Winning Gamble*; and so he rigged that fancy targeting system you told me about to make a complete sensor recording of Praysh's defense array on the flight in."

Sansia's face had turned to glazed stone. "Why, you vac-headed, manipulative nerf belly," she breathed, her eyes locked

on her father's face like twin turbolasers. "You deliberately put me *through* that—?"

"I thought someone of Jade's skills would have a better chance of getting out alone," Bardrin cut her off brusquely. "And she would have an easier time getting to the *Winning Gamble* from Praysh's audience chamber instead of the slave quarters, which is why I sent that anonymous tip suggesting he contact the Mrahash of Kvabja about the floater globe. Once we had the *Winning Gamble* and could analyze Praysh's outer defense array, our private troops could have swept in with ease, rescued you, *and* destroyed Praysh's operation in a single blow."

"And the Uoti prototypes?"

Bardrin shrugged. "A small bonus. A reward, if you like, for our civic-mindedness in eliminating a particularly noxious slaver. We are business people, Sansia."

He looked significantly at Karrde. "And I taught you better than to vent business disputes in front of outsiders."

"Yes, you certainly did." Sansia took a deep breath; then turned to look at Mara. "Whatever he promised to pay you, you deserve more. Name your price."

Mara looked coolly at Bardrin. "You can't afford to pay for what he put me through," she said. "But I'll settle for a copy of the *Winning Gamble's* tracking record. There's some serious justice I intend to rain on Praysh's head, and I don't think I want to trust your father to do it for me. Civic-minded or not."

Sansia threw a malicious smile at Bardrin. "I'll do better than that. Take the whole ship."

"*What?*" Bardrin leaped to his feet, oblivious to the blaster that had suddenly appeared in Karrde's hand. "Sansia, you are *not* going to give *my* ship to these—these—"

He sputtered to a halt. Sansia gave the silence a couple more heartbeats, then looked back at Mara. "You already know the access and operating codes," she continued as if her father hadn't spoken. "It's a good ship. Enjoy."

"Thank you," Mara said. "I will."

“There’s also the matter of *my* fee,” Karrde spoke up.

“What are you talking about?” Bardrin demanded. “She already gave Jade more than—”

“I’m not taking about payment for your daughter’s rescue,” Karrde cut him off coldly. “I’m referring to my fee for not killing you outright over your kidnapping my crew.”

He looked at Sansia. “Unless you’d rather not make such a deal, of course. I can certainly take my fee in blood instead if you prefer.”

“It *is* tempting,” Sansia admitted. “But no, I’ll deal with Daddy dear in my own way.” She smiled thinly. “Out of sight of outsiders. What sort of fee do you want?”

“We’ll work out something later,” Karrde told her, putting his blaster away. “I’ll be in touch. Come, Mara. It’s time to get back to clean air again.”

They left the room and headed through the strangely deserted mansion; and it was only as they were descending the final staircase toward the vestibule that Karrde’s earlier comment about having had professional assistance finally became clear. Lurking in the shadow of a carved support pillar where he could cover both the stairway and the door was a silhouette she remembered all too well.

“I called in a few favors from Councilor Organa Solo,” Karrde murmured in explanation from beside her. “It was a very profitable trade.”

“Yes,” Mara said, shivering involuntarily as they passed the Noghri warrior and headed down the stairway. “I’ll just bet it was.”

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“Mara?”

Blowing a drop of sweat off the end of her nose, Mara keyed off the combat practice remote and shut down her lightsaber. “Come in,” she called.

“Thought I’d find you here,” Karrde said, glancing around the *Wild Karrde’s* exercise room as he walked in. “H’sishi said you’d been spending a lot of time alone in here. Making angry sounds was how she put it.”

“I’ve been working out a few frustrations,” Mara conceded, snagging a towel and wiping the moisture off her face. “How’s she doing?”

“Mostly healed,” Karrde said, crossing to one of the resistance benches and sitting down. “It was her very first time in a bacta tank, as it happens. She’s rather impressed.”

“We need to do more for her than just get her back to health,” Mara said. “She really put her neck on the block when she brought my lightsaber into Praysh’s palace.”

“I agree,” Karrde said. “Though oddly enough, she doesn’t see it that way at all. She told me that once she found your lightsaber and realized you were a Jedi, she had no doubt at all that you could handle Praysh’s legions with ease.”

Mara grimaced. Jedi ... “I trust you disabused her of that notion?”

“Not really. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a Jedi in everything but name.”

It wasn’t that simple, Mara knew. Not nearly that simple. But it also wasn’t a subject she wanted to get into right now. “Were you able to dig anything out of her as to what sort of reward she might like?” she asked instead. “I couldn’t make any headway at all on that subject on our way off Torpris.”

“According to her, all she’s ever wanted was to get out of that demeaning scavenger life she’d been forced into,” Karrde said. “It doesn’t sound like she has much in the way of marketable skills, though, so I was thinking of offering her a course of study in starship operations at our training center on Quyste.”

“I think she’d like that,” Mara nodded. “She seemed fascinated with everything about the *Winning Gamble* during the flight.”

“Good,” Karrde said. “If she proves competent enough after her training, I thought I’d also see if she’d be interested in joining



the organization.” He smiled. “Though whether that would qualify as a reward or a punishment is probably debatable in some circles.”

The smile faded. “Actually, I was wondering if you were finding yourself in one of those particular circles at the moment.”

Mara felt her lip twist. “You do find convoluted ways to bring up these subjects, don’t you?”

“It adds variety to conversation,” he said. “Particularly when the other party to the discussion seems inclined to avoid the issue.”

Mara sighed. “I don’t know, Karrde. I’ve been feeling—I don’t know. Squeezed, I suppose. The responsibilities have been weighing more and more on me lately, and this thing with Bardrin seems to have brought it all to a head. I don’t like the fact that he picked on us in the first place because we were smugglers and couldn’t go to the authorities over the kidnapping of the *Wild Karrde’s* crew. And I really don’t like the fact he was able to manipulate me so easily by threatening them that way.”

She waved the lightsaber. “I feel like I need to get out somewhere. Anywhere. At least for a while.”

“I understand,” Karrde said quietly. “It is a crushing responsibility sometimes.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Fortunately, like all good employers, I’ve come up with a possible solution. How would you like to go into business for yourself?”

Mara frowned. “Are you throwing me out?”

“Oh no,” Karrde assured her. “Certainly not unless you yourself want to leave. I was talking about setting you up with a small trading company of your own for a while. A totally legitimate one, of course, which should help keep opportunists like Ja Bardrin off your back. You’d get a chance to relax away from the perennial intrigues and back-blading of the fringe, get some experience with small-business management, and possibly even gain a little more respect among the high-noses on Coruscant.”

“That last one’s pretty low on my list,” Mara said, glowering down at her lightsaber. “What do you get out of it?”

Karrde waved a hand casually. “Oh, just the satisfaction of helping out a loyal and trusted colleague. And, of course, getting back a more experienced and relaxed lieutenant when you return to the organization.”

“And if I decide not to come back?”

A muscle in Karrde’s cheek twitched. “I would hate to lose you, Mara,” he said quietly. “But I would also never try to hold on to you if you truly didn’t want to stay. That’s not how I do things.”

Mara fingered her lightsaber. Freedom. Real, genuine freedom... “I suppose I could try it for a while,” she said at last. “Where would we pull the start-up money and resources from?”

“From Sansia Bardrin, of course,” Karrde said. “She still owes me, after all. And now that she has an effective veto over the family’s business decisions, her father can hardly do anything to block it.”

Mara shook her head in disbelief. “I really would have expected her to do a lot more to him than just appropriate some of his stock,” she said. “Certainly given the way she was looking at him when we left.”

“They’re business people,” Karrde pointed out. “That’s what warfare looks like in those circles. And of course, you already have a ship. The *Winning Gamble*.”

Mara blinked. “I thought that was the organization’s.”

“Sansia gave it to you, not the organization,” Karrde reminded her. “And you’re certainly not going to make a case that you didn’t earn it.”

“No,” Mara murmured, an odd feeling trickling through her. She’d never owned her own ship before. Never. Even when she was the Emperor’s Hand, all the ships and equipment she used were Imperial issue and property. Her own ship ...

“Anyway, start thinking about what exactly you’ll want and we can work out the details later,” Karrde said, standing up. “I’ll let you get back to your exercises now.” He headed for the door—

“Karrde?” Dankin’s voice came over the exercise room intercom. “You there?”

“Yes,” Karrde called toward the speaker. “What is it?”

“We’ve got an incoming transmission from Luke Skywalker,” Dankin said. “He reports the New Republic raid on Praysh’s fortress is over and all the slaves have been rescued unharmed. He wants to thank you for sending him the defense array data, and to discuss your fee for it.”

“Thank you,” Karrde said. “Congratulate him, and tell him I’ll be right there.”

The intercom clicked off. “You sent *Luke* the data?” Mara asked. It didn’t seem like the sort of thing a Jedi Master would get personally involved in.

“I thought he’d be able to move on it faster than if I tried going through the New Republic command structure,” Karrde said. “Apparently, I was right.”

“It must be terrible to be right so often,” Mara murmured.

“It is a heavy burden,” Karrde agreed with a smile. “One just has to learn to live with it. I’ll see you later.”

He left. Wiping her face again, Mara tossed the towel aside and ignited her lightsaber. A new job—even if it was only temporary—and her own ship. Her very own ship.

Though of course she would have to change its name. *Winning Gamble* sounded more like something Solo or Calrissian would use. No, she needed something more personal, something that would hearken back to what she’d gone through to earn it. The *Jade’s Whip*, perhaps, or the *Jade’s Sting*.

No. She smiled. The *Jade’s Fire*.

Keying on the practice remote, feeling more relaxed than she had in weeks, she settled into combat stance and lifted her lightsaber. Yes, this was going to be interesting. Very interesting, indeed.

# **Gathering Shadows**

**by Kathy Burdette**

For the first time in years, Harkness couldn't stand the silence.

He had two options: he could lie with his good eye open and think, or he could lie with his good eye shut and think. It didn't matter either way, because the cell was pitch black and the only indication that he wasn't having a strange dream was the smell of something dead or dying in the same room.

Maybe it was him. All during the interrogation, Harkness had kept his focus away from the pain and the questions, and where he had put his focus he could not remember, but he wasn't required to do it anymore. It hurt to breathe; it hurt to be wearing clothes; it hurt to swallow. The nicest thing the Imperials had done for him was not to put his boots back on his stinging feet.

Moreover, there was a humming sound in his head. It could have been something to do with where he had placed his focus, or it could have been an aftereffect of the drugs. Which brought to mind the image of the round, black interrogator droid that had administered them. Which, in turn, had left him with a vision of

sickly colors, distorted sounds, and a sensation similar to that of having needles in his brain and his eyes and the whole inside of his head. That thought, coupled with the humming sound, sent him into a near panic, and he decided to drown both elements out entirely.

“Hey!” he said. His voice was hoarse and thick, but it echoed and that made him feel better. At least he wasn’t floating in some infinite vacuum. “Hey, yeah. This is great. Way to be, Harkness.”

He thought about all the stories he had heard about prisoners who had been locked up alone for decades and gone insane. He had expected that any time in solitary confinement would be paradise, but now he could see himself in two years, drooling, talking to himself all the time. People would look at him funny and whisper about him. On the other hand, wasn’t that their normal practice anyway? Harkness decided he would probably be fine as long as he never answered himself.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe it could be worse.”

“I doubt it.”

Harkness froze. He had been answered by a female voice a short distance away.

“Hello?” he said tentatively.

“Yeah?” said the woman. Her voice was raw, and its thick, nasal quality suggested that she had a broken nose, but her tone was steady. The sound of a person in the comfortable situation of things not being able to become worse.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

She slurred her words together, and it took a moment for Harkness to extrapolate what she had actually said: “Master Sergeant Jai Raventhorn, Alliance Infiltrators.”

Harkness absorbed that. “I thought High Command dissolved the Infiltrators,” he said.

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” said the woman.

“Hah!” said Harkness. It wasn’t a real laugh, but it was the only positive response he could come up with. Raventhorn’s voice carried the depth of the numbness, the pain, the

humiliation, and the relief that was in Harkness right then, and he dismissed the automatic assumption that she was some COMPNOR agent planted in the cell to get him to talk casually.

It also sounded as though she were shivering, as Harkness was. Most likely she had been done exactly the same way he had, and that made him furious. But he didn't want to tell her that because she might think he was being patronizing.

"So what do you do now instead, Sergeant Raventhorn?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"Harkness."

"Harkness what?"

It suddenly occurred to him that he couldn't recall his first name. If he had one at all.

"Harkness what?" Jai asked again.

"I ... think it's just Harkness," he said. More enthusiastically, he added, "I'm a mercenary."

"A merc. Really. I don't think that's what I am."

"Try to remember. We're just experiencing the aftereffects of the mind-probe."

This was just a guess on Harkness's part. But it made him feel better, and Jai evidently believed it because she took a few moments to think. Finally she said, "Oh, wait—I work in Intel now."

"Intel? Were you with Red Team Five?"

"I think so. Yeah, I was," she said, and there was no trace of pride in her voice on admitting that. But then came a sudden spark of interest. "Are you one of the mercs who tipped us off about this place?"

"No, but guess what?"

"What?"

"I think there might be an Imperial garrison here on Zelos."

She gave a half-amused snort. "You think?"

"Is the rest of your team around here?"

"They're dead," said Jai.

"Oh," Harkness said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." She gave a heavy sigh. "I don't suppose you told them anything."

"Who?" asked Harkness. He was feeling confused. His lips had started to feel numb.

"The Imperials."

"No," said Harkness, and then he was struck anew. "Hey—"

"What?"

"I didn't tell them anything!" He had completely shut it out of his mind, but his interrogators had realized that mind-probing him was useless and therefore the interrogation was a failure, and they had tortured him just to make themselves feel better. Suddenly Harkness felt positively warm inside. It was the ultimate test and he had passed it. He could actually feel himself grinning. There was not a lower place that could possibly exist, and his situation could only improve if they had him killed now. He didn't remember ever feeling so secure in his life.

"Yeah," said Raventhorn, "I heard you the first time."

"How about you?" he asked. "You tell them anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"Good for you."

"Yeah, good for me," she said unenthusiastically.

"Doesn't that make you feel great?"

"Not especially."

"You know how many people can't make it through interrogations like that? If they don't talk, they usually just die from the physical punishment."

"I know."

"My point is, the Imperials could have done worse things. They could have run a catheter straight up your nasal cavity into your brain. If you didn't die you'd be jelly."

"You're a lot of fun to have around," said Jai.

"I'm serious!" Harkness said, although he didn't know what exactly he was feeling. It was almost giddiness. "Listen, you can

go back home and tell everyone you didn't crack, and they'll give you a medal or something."

"Yeah, they *would*," Jai said in complete disgust. "That's what's wrong with the New Republic."

"What is?"

"Medals. Glory. You know. These days they give stuff out if you remember not to wipe your nose on your sleeve in front of General Madine."

Jai's voice was fading and Harkness's vision seemed to narrow to a pinhole. There was a sensation of a cool, gray fog beginning to permeate his body from underneath him.

"I can't feel my hands," said Jai.

"Me neither," said Harkness. He didn't want to talk anymore, but he knew the silence would seep into the fog, into his body. And the humming! Why wouldn't it stop? "Do you know him?" Harkness asked.

"Who?"

"General Madine?"

"Do I?" asked Jai.

"I don't know," said Harkness.

It got quiet again. Harkness was finding himself less panic-stricken about it. He was cold all over, but he was getting comfortable. He knew he should have tried to stay awake, but he hadn't been so relaxed in a very, very long time. He felt free. He wanted to savor it, even if it meant dying. Especially if it meant dying.

In fact, he would have let himself drift off entirely, except that Jai said, "I wish they would have."

Her voice seemed to ring, not off the walls but all through Harkness's head. "Would ... what?" he asked.

"I wish they would have turned my brain to jelly."

Silence. Harkness's mind immediately cleared itself out.

"Wait a second. What's that mean?" he asked.

"I just have this feeling," Jai said.

"Like what?"



“Like there’s nobody waiting for me to come back.”

“What is up with this place?” said Platt for what was about the third time in fifteen minutes.

Tru’eb glanced up from the information console. “I said I don’t know,” he told her irritably, although he could understand what Platt was talking about. Passengers and flight crews were roaming throughout the spaceport, checking their cargo specs at public maintenance terminals, slumped in chairs still waiting for their ships to pass muster, rushing to catch the next shuttle. Perfectly normal. But the locals—the maintenance people, the desk personnel, and the green-eyed humans—all had a raw, shaky look about them. Tru’eb usually associated expressions like those, and the scent they gave off, with sheer terror barely held in check.

“I mean we’ve been waiting for four hours now and nobody knows anything. Dirk could be dead somewhere.”

“Harkness strikes me as rather resilient,” said Tru’eb. “I doubt he ran into any serious opposition.”

“Like what? That Imperial garrison nobody knows anything about?”

Tru’eb didn’t answer. The whole point of the mission had been relatively simple; there was a stash of Imperial-issue weapons being transported in, disguised as ship parts. Platt, Tru’eb, and Harkness had planned on liberating the weapons for their own personal use. Platt had a couple of smuggler friends who were only too happy to provide a distraction. At a place like this, with the spaceport personnel totally clouded over by fear or whatever, nobody saw Tru’eb and his friends take custody of the alleged ship parts. Or nobody cared.

The hitch in the plan came with Harkness, after they had the weapons. Platt and Tru’eb hadn’t worked with Harkness for very long, but it wasn’t hard to gather that he had some sort of personal vendetta against the Empire. Where Platt and Tru’eb

would not have bothered to ask where the weapons came from (as long as they turned a fair profit), Harkness had to know. Which had led them to some of his contacts within New Republic Intel, and somebody leaked him the information that there was currently a team investigating a probable hidden Imperial garrison on Zelos. While Platt and Tru'eb were discussing terms with an arms dealer at the south end of town, Harkness had rented a repulsorlift vehicle and told them he would be right back. That was four days ago.

"He's crazy, but he's a good man," Platt said. "I like working with him. Despite the vendetta thing."

"I agree, but I was hoping this trip wouldn't be—"

"Excuse me, folks?" somebody said. Tru'eb and Platt turned around; standing behind Platt was a green-eyed starport official in a light green uniform, holding a datapad.

"I've got the—right here, here's the—" He held out the datapad.

"Oh, right, you're the guy I talked to earlier," said Platt.

"Yes ... about the information you requested? First of all, I'm sorry that took so long."

"Don't worry about it. Although I wouldn't have thought skiff rentals would be that hard to track down," said Platt.

"Well, we've had security problems before ... there was a shipjacking about four years ago, and some crime lords got involved—"

"What did you find?" asked Tru'eb.

The man swallowed and held his datapad close to his chest. "I don't know how to tell you this," he said.

Platt and Tru'eb exchanged glances. "What?" said Platt. "The skiff blew up? What?"

"No, but there's been a..."

"A what? Tell us!"

"A—a mistake. On the readout."

Platt visibly restrained herself from striking the man.

“What do you mean?” asked Tru’eb, reaching up and putting a hand on Platt’s shoulder.

“Well, it says here that the gentleman you’re looking for rented a spaceport skiff that he took out past the badlands ... all the way north, into the mountains.”

“So what?” said Platt.

“It’s impossible. Nobody goes out there. Ever.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated. After looking over his shoulder a couple of times, he drew himself in close toward Platt and Tru’eb, who drew in close toward him. Their heads were almost touching.

“There,” he said in a low voice, “is where the dead can walk.”

A week earlier, Jai had been sitting in the communications tent at a flimsy metal table, with the comm unit placed in front of her, when her C.O.’s voice came over the channel.

“Raventhorn?” he said. “We’re in Sector Three now. Looks like there’s a couple of scout troopers guarding a bunker.”

Jai put down her protein stick and swallowed. “Well, whatever you do, sir, don’t—”

“Moving in to attack.”

She put a hand over her face. Her C.O. was a Rodian lieutenant who had somehow slipped past Officer’s Candidate School during the New Republic’s post-Endor barrage of promotions. The rest of her teammates had little or no field experience—just training. Great. Three hundred and twenty-seven combat missions, and I never got a splinter. I move to Intel and these idiots are going to get me killed on the first day. “Sir, negative! You shouldn’t compromise your position, is that clear? It’s probably an—”

A shout came over the comm channel, but it wasn’t directed at Jai. “This one’s for Mon Mothma, guys!”

There were faint rallying shouts from the other team members. Jai could actually hear the blasterfire, quick little shots being fired

off somewhere off in the distance. Then there was a louder shot, followed by an explosion.

After that, the exploding never stopped; within minutes, the Imperials had moved in and surrounded the command post.

Jai ran outside into the cold, wet mountain air. A flickering glow lit up the sky in the distance.

—*ambush.*

Seconds later a massive blaster bolt, artillery grade, slammed into the tent where Jai's remaining team members were sleeping. The whole thing was immediately swept into flames and took the munitions tent with it.

Jai didn't hear the explosion. She just felt herself rising up in the air, and then a numb sensation shot through her body. She never remembered hitting the ground, but suddenly she was lying on her stomach, blinking furiously and spitting out dirt. When she looked up again, there was a bright, artificial light shining into her streaming eyes.

"Get up."

A gray shape stood over her. His voice was muffled, and the rest of what he said was lost to the ringing in Jai's ears. She could feel an unbearable heat coming from the burning tents, but the gray-clad person stayed where he was. Several moments later there were about twenty of him all around her. She was jerked to her feet.

"Hands over your head. Do it now."

Jai had never been cornered before. She should have lunged for somebody, should have made them kill her right then and there—because if there was one cardinal rule about being an Infiltrator, if there was one thing you made absolutely sure that you did, it was to die before you got taken into custody.

But a face flashed into her memory, and she hesitated. Before she had a chance to register who she was thinking of, or to change her mind, one of her captors took a fast step toward her, the butt of his blaster rifle swinging at her face.

Suddenly Harkness shouted her name, and she started.

“What?” she cried. “What is it?”

“Are you still there?” Harkness said.

“Where would I go, idiot?” she said, annoyed.

“I’ve been calling your name for twenty minutes here!”

“Really?”

“Yes! What happened to you?”

“I was just thinking.”

“Well, you could have answered me!” Harkness sounded almost furious.

“Hey, look, I didn’t do it to spite you! I just got to thinking. I’m trying to remember stuff.”

Harkness backed off. “Well ... but ... I was just—” He floundered for a second. “Okay. As long as you’re not dying of shock over there.”

“Only when you yell real loud like that.”

“What were you thinking about?” Harkness asked.

“Just stuff,” said Jai. “Did it get warmer in here?”

“No,” he said. “Listen—mind if I ask you something?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t care about your team. You don’t seem to care about the Rebellion anymore.”

“I do care about the Rebellion. It’s the New Republic I hate.”

“And you say you can’t remember if you have any family.”

“Are you taking notes or something?”

“I’m just curious; what made you resist interrogation?”

“Look, just because I don’t like what happened to the Alliance doesn’t mean I’m willing to turn on it.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he said. “What did you focus on?”

“I focused on not telling anybody anything.”

Harkness gave a terse sigh. “Sarge—”

“What is your problem?”

“You are not listening to me.” Harkness slowed his voice down. “In that moment ... in the interrogation room ... when the drugs had worn off ... and you tried to feel sorry for your interrogators ... and you tried to hyperventilate yourself into a

trance ... and you realized that it didn't matter what you did, because those Imperials were living out their life-long dream of making an Infiltrator scream, and they were having so much fun they might never stop ..."

Jai stared at where she thought Harkness's face probably was.

"Yeah," she said.

"What was it that you focused on? What image came to your mind?"

"I don't know."

"Then think! *Come* on! Was it a person?"

"Yeah, it ..." Jai stopped herself. "Yeah," she said. "It was my little sister."

Harkness shifted around. "You're somebody's older sister?"

"You sound like you think that's funny."

"No, no. I can just imagine you ordering some six-year-old around."

"Well, she's a little older than that. She's a major in Special Ops."

"So she gets to order you around."

"She wouldn't dare."

"Major Raventhorn," said Harkness. "That name sounds familiar."

"'Course it does," she said.

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"I don't know." Jai's brain clouded up as easily as it had cleared, and she felt a throbbing tightness all the way from her shoulders up into the back of her head. "I thought I hadn't seen her since she was about twelve. But I can see her with an adult's face ... I thought I just talked to her a few months ago ... or last week..."

"Keep thinking," said Harkness.

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"No, the other beat-up merc across the room. How come you didn't talk?"

"I don't know."

"Keep thinking," Jai said, with more than a trace of sarcasm.

"No, really, I can't ... but I feel like I knew a minute ago...."

"I'd love to know what they did with our heads," Jai said irritably. She found that she could lift her arms now, and kept trying to massage the tension out of her shoulders with one hand. After a while she began to notice that the pain wasn't just in the muscles but in the skin, and her hand came away wet. She forgot all about the tension and felt the burning all across her shoulders and her back.

Suddenly Harkness yelled, "Dirk!"

Jai felt her whole body tighten. If she could have sprung to her feet, she would have. "Who? What? Who?"

"Dirk! That's my first name!"

Jai's body relaxed, and her limbs shook from the tension release. "Will you quit screaming out like that?"

"Dirk Harkness," he said. "I'm Dirk Harkness."

"Dirk Harkness?" Jai finally said, primarily to get him to stop chanting it. "What kind of name is that? You don't sound like a Dirk."

"So don't call me Dirk." He made some shuffling noises again; Jai imagined that he was lying on his side now.

"Fine, Harkness," she said. "If you remember your first name, then tell me what kept you from talking."

Dirk was silent.

"Well?"

"I think," he said, "it has something to do with this humming in my head."

"Well, well, well," Platt said, peering over the ridge. "Our boy Harkness certainly knows how to sniff out Imperials."

"How many?" Tru'eb asked. He was a short distance below her in the gully.

Platt slid down the steep rock wall and handed him the macrobinoculars. "Look for yourself. I make it about two, maybe three. See them?"

Tru'eb got a foothold in the crags and hoisted himself up into the thick, tufted grass on top of the ridge. "I can't see anything," he said. "The fog is even worse over there."

"The yellow switch polarizes the lenses. See the hill directly across from us? It runs into that cliff, you can't miss it. Now look at the a ledge sticking out of the cliff, out over the hill. You see the Imperials?"

"No ... just trees and plants ..."

"They're sitting in a dugout under a camouflaged lean-to."

"Ah, yes," Tru'eb said after a moment. "Army scouts. But I don't see a garrison."

"I don't even see any valley," Platt said.

Nonetheless, Platt's chrono indicated they were some 1,200 meters above sea level. This neck of the mountains was permeated by rocky ground and sheer cliffs topped with conifer trees. The Bare Forest, the locals called it. Or at least that was what their guide had called it before he had bolted with the repulsorlift a day earlier. At least he had left them some supplies and a one-person emergency inflation shelter, the latter of which had been an awfully tight fit last night.

Still, Harkness had left a trail of blaster-charred trees and discarded rations. Those clues led Platt and Tru'eb straight into the remains of the Rebel camp—a flat, razed area with scattered ashes, melted tent frames, and smashed comm equipment. The trees were bent and broken, probably crushed by AT-ATs. Platt was hard-pressed to imagine where one of those would have come from. All around was the acrid smell of burned flesh and spent blaster packs; Platt had to avert her eyes from the scattered bodies. Most of them had been shot in the back, Tru'eb told her. The rest were charred beyond recognition.

"Those scouts have an E-web, did you notice?" Tru'eb said, adjusting the sights. "But there are, let's see, one hundred-thirty



meters between us and them. I doubt they would be able to see us from there.”

“They wouldn’t, if I weren’t wearing red. Duck back down.”

“You really ought to rethink your wardrobe one of these days, Platt,” Tru’eb said dryly.

Platt grinned. “I thought you appreciated my keen fashion sense.”

“I do. It’s my whole reason for living.”

Platt took back the macros. Then she looked up at the murky sky. “Say, Tru’eb ...”

“Yes?”

“Did everything around here just go really quiet, or is it me?”

They listened, and looked at each other. All morning there had been a constant chattering and hissing of birds, which had suddenly stopped. Platt pulled out her blaster.

“Did our Green Boys notice us?” she whispered.

“Let me have a look—”

Something came crashing through the underbrush behind them. Platt and Tru’eb spun around, but when the thing came out of the mist, they just stood where they were, frozen.

It was a Sullustan in New Republic military fatigues. But something about him was not quite right, and horribly surreal: his eyes were a milky gray and his head tilted at a grotesque angle. His arms hung at his sides, waving around slightly at each step as the head jarred and bobbed.

“Walking Dead!” Tru’eb hissed, backing away from the Sullustan, who seemed to be headed purposefully toward him.

Platt fired a blue stunbolt into the Sullustan’s chest. He gave a wild spasm and then flopped to the ground.

Silence. Platt and Tru’eb looked at each other.

“Was that real?” she whispered, and looked at the ground again. The Sullustan still lay there with his face in a mud puddle. In his back was a week-old blaster wound.

Platt scrambled up the ridge again. One of the guards was situated at the front of the dugout, leisurely wiping down the

barrel of the E-web; the other sat off to the side, staring into space, wagging his foot. Occasionally he would lean out and look up at the gray afternoon sky.

"Doesn't look like they heard," Platt said.

Tru'eb gingerly approached the Sullustan. He fumbled for a pulse, and then stepped back.

"Come look at this, Platt. It's incredible."

Platt gave the guards a final look before sliding back down.

"What?" she asked.

"Look," he said, pointing.

The Sullustan lay twitching, but not breathing. On closer inspection he turned out to be completely immobile; the appearance of twitching was caused by the presence of hundreds of tiny wormlike creatures swarming around the hole in his back.

Platt felt her gorge rise. She backed away, but there was no escaping the stench of the body or the memory of the worms; she leaned against a tree and vomited.

Then she stood up and coughed a couple of times. "Thank you, Tru'eb. Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm just going to go far away from you right now."

She ventured a little ways into the woods, until the smell dissipated somewhat. Tru'eb followed her. "But don't you see?" he said. "This is the source of the Walking Dead illusion. Some parasites can release enzymes which provide electrical stimulation to the brain of a dead host. So this fellow may be biologically deceased, but there are artificial signals going out to his body."

Platt turned around. "Get outta here."

"Do you have a better explanation?"

"Worms operating a complex bioelectrical system? You're making that up."

"All right, so I'm just guessing. But you know," said Tru'eb, studying a worm perched on the tip of his index finger, "I have actually heard about a similar incident. Do you remember when I was working on Big Quince's ship?"

Platt rolled her eyes. "You think I could ever forget?"

“This was before I met you. I was not privy to a great deal of information, of course, but I recall a story that was going around. Apparently some Imperial friends of Big Quince’s were quite traumatized after seeing a squadron of dead stormtroopers stagger across a battle-field. At the time I assumed that the storytellers were spiced. Now I wonder.”

Worms inside your armor. Platt felt her entire body start to pucker.

“Supposedly,” Tru’eb went on, “each corpse walked around aimlessly for a while, then went back to the place where it had been killed.”

“And this guy here was walking toward the Green Boys over there.”

“That does not necessarily mean he died there.”

“No, but something’s definitely up with those guys,” Platt said. “I mean, look at them. If it weren’t for the fog, they’d have the best vantage point in the whole mountain range. You wanna tell me they’re just sitting around guarding nothing?”

Tru’eb held up his hands. “Furthest thing from my mind.”

Platt looked at the Sullustan again. For a moment she thought she was going to vomit again. But instead, she stopped herself and broke into a slow grin.

“Hold on just a second,” she said. “I have an idea.”

When Harkness opened his eyes this time, it was still dark, but his body felt almost weightless. Not dizzy and thick, not drugged; just light. It was because there was less pain in his body now.

He didn’t feel as though he could sit up yet, but at least the possibility of moving didn’t fill him with trepidation anymore. And the humming sound lingered at the back of his head in a muted, almost pleasant way. He entertained the idea that it might be a fraction of a song Chessa used to sing; she had been on his mind for what seemed like hours now, although he couldn’t remember her ever singing in front of him.

“Hey,” he said. His voice was stronger, clearer. “Hey, Sarge.”

“What?” said Jai, still across the room.

“How you feeling?”

“Better, I guess,” she said.

“Me too. I don’t know why.”

“How long have we been here?”

“Dunno. A few days. Maybe a week.”

“Maybe an hour.”

“Maybe.”

“Has this ... uh ... ever happened to you before?” she asked.

“Getting captured? Yes,” he said. The memory of it appeared out of nowhere and surprised him; nothing about his current ordeal had seemed familiar until now.

“Oh,” she said.

He expected her to ask if that was how he had lost his eye, and then remembered that she still couldn’t see his face. In all the time they had been there, their eyes still had not adjusted to the darkness.

“Did they work you over that time?” she asked.

“Yeah. Worse than this.”

“Can’t imagine that.”

“Well, maybe not by much,” he said. “Is that what you were thinking about over there? My prison record?”

Suddenly he recalled something he had said earlier, regarding the gray boys in the interrogation room. Living their lifelong dream of making an Infiltrator scream. Maybe Jai had been done the same way as he had, and then again—

“Jai?” he said tentatively. “Do you—still have both eyes?”

“Huh?”

“I mean ... did they put your eyes out?”

Jai laughed, a surprising, loud, sardonic cackle. It took her a couple of minutes to rein it in, and then she said, “Hey, Dirk—who can tell?”

Harkness felt his lips twitch slightly.

Then he heard more laughter, both of their voices, ringing off the walls, choking through the pain, and eventually dying down to a few stuttering gasps. When it was over, his ribs ached and his throat hurt, but he felt an unfamiliar satisfaction.

"Why'd you ask me that, anyway?" asked Jai around a final chuckle.

"Forget it. Long story."

"Oh, well, you better not get started. I have to be somewhere in ten minutes."

"Yeah, I have a date myself."

It occurred to Harkness that he did have someplace to be, and people to be with. But where, and with whom? When the walls stopped ringing, the humming came back.

"Is that what you've been thinking about?" asked Jai. "My eyes? If it makes you feel better, Harkness, I'm told they're stunning."

"No," said Harkness, and he sobered. "I was actually thinking about Chessa."

"Who's that?"

"My girl." Harkness thought about her face the last time he had seen her. It was a nice, normal day, full of routines, loading the ship, the two of them flirting over the cargo load. But he had known, somewhere on the odd fringes of his mind, that she was about to die. He always knew when somebody was about to die. There was a softness to his or her features on those days. He would see it all through his stint in the Alliance, and he saw it for the first time in Chessa, standing there in the docking bay.

"Do you think about her a lot?" Jai asked.

"She's dead," said Harkness in his usual blunt, conversation-ending tone. Dirk, how's Chessa doing these days? She's dead. Oh. They always changed the subject after that.

But not Jai. "I know," she said.

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did. It's the way you said her name."

Harkness didn't know how to respond to that. Jai had spoken with such confidence, and he hated it when people thought they could dissect him. Like all those Alliance counselors he never wanted to go to.

"How did I say her name?"

"Like it was sacred."

"So what? That's how you said your sister's name."

"Yeah, but—"

Jai broke off, so abruptly that Harkness thought she had disappeared altogether. In her place Harkness imagined a deep black hole generating silence, threatening to suck him through, too. Harkness could actually hear it, ringing, clouding his ears.

Then his mind cleared out and he realized what he had said. And what it had meant.

"Sarge?" he said.

"Yeah." Her voice took on a heavy, listless resignation that was very familiar to Harkness. He wished that she had the energy to crawl across the floor and smack him across the face. Or that he had the energy to do it for her.

"When?" he asked.

"Two months ago."

Endor. No wonder the name had sounded familiar. Harkness remembered briefly meeting a tall, dark-haired officer named Morgan Raventhorn shortly before the battle. A kid, really. He imagined that girl lying on the floor across from him, with a slightly older face.

Jai remained quiet, but her breathing hadn't changed. She wasn't crying. He wondered whether she had cried over her sister at all, and if not, whether she would anytime soon. That idea puzzled him; up until that moment, he had guessed that Jai's mind worked much the way his did, and that their experiences were similar. But he had never been so numb he couldn't mourn.

Harkness's usual course, as a practiced loner, was to give other loners a fairly wide berth. If they wanted to be left alone, he knew it, and he would honor it. But Jai was different. Certainly

Harkness had lost his faith in the New Republic, had lost his faith in love, and sometimes had lost faith in himself and his purpose. But he couldn't imagine what you did when you lost your faith in everything all at once.

"Chessa was killed by a bunch of stormtroopers," he told her. "All she was doing was loading crates, but they started a firefight with her. They knew she was a Rebel sympathizer."

Jai was silent. Harkness went on, "I had been thinking about marriage at the time. I was an idiot, you know; I was young, I thought I could have everything."

"I had a fiancé myself," she said.

"What was his name?"

"Krül."

She said it the way she had said Morgan's name.

Harkness didn't think he should say anything else after that. He felt embarrassed at having told Jai so much about himself. Even after four years in the Alliance, among people he trusted without question, he had not told anyone about Chessa. To those who had known her, he never talked about what she meant to him.

The silence seemed to fill up all around him like some invisible snow, and he thought about the absolute last time he had seen Chessa. Pasty, bleeding. Not even a person, really. Some dead people looked like they were sleeping; Chessa's expression was frozen, her eyes staring up at the docking bay ceiling, surprised and horrified. He shook that image away and pictured her alive and healthy. Then he pictured her lying in a dark cell with a bloody nose and nothing to live for.

At that moment, Harkness came across a part of himself that he did not like to acknowledge, and his stomach tightened. It was the part that had already begun to dissolve the security of his prison, and his sense of unparalleled freedom. It was the entire reason the interrogation officers had seen fit to beat him. He had yet again discovered, to his dismay, the part of himself that wanted to survive. Whole. Undefeated.

Harkness sighed heavily. Well, it was cozy while it lasted. He shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths, willing his body to heal itself, willing the pain to stop. It wasn't that he had any flair for manipulating the Force or anything like that; he just knew that the reason he had survived all the injuries and setbacks and impossible missions that had marked his military career was because he had willed it. And that was why he wasn't going to die in this cold, rank little cell. Just by wanting to heal, willing himself to live, he'd find some way to save himself from whatever the Imperials had planned for him.

Saving Jai, on the other hand—that was the part he feared he couldn't do anything about.

“Radlin?” said the taller of the guards, thoughtfully giving the E-web a final wipe and sticking the rag in his back pocket. His voice echoed off the mountainside. “Radlin, I'm bored.”

“I guessed,” said Radlin, still sitting and waggling his foot.

“I mean really bored. Really really. What are we even here for? There's no more Rebels.”

Radlin said, “It's procedure. Procedure is this thing you do where you follow orders so you get that promotion thing we talked about?”

“I'm just saying we should think up something to do.”

“You're just all antsy 'cause that merc guy showed up looking for the Rebels.”

“*You're* just all mad 'cause we weren't the ones who caught him. Look, Rad, let's just go hunting or something. Pick off some more of those Walking Dead Rebels.”

Behind a nearby tree, Tru'eb caught his breath when he heard them mention the Walking Dead. But it was too late—right on cue, Platt came stumbling up the hill toward the guards. She was trying to imitate the Sullustan's jerky walk and his glazed expression, but her steps were exaggerated and her tongue was



hanging out of her mouth. Tru'eb put a hand to his face and shook his head.

Nevertheless, Radlin leaped up, knocked over his chair, and stumbled backwards. When the tall one turned around and saw Platt, he visibly tensed, but he gave a terse, macho laugh. "Radlin, you want this one?"

Platt stopped when the guards' ledge was at her chest level. "Excuse me, gentlemen," she said, clasping her hands behind her back. "Is this the way to the spice mines of Kessel?"

Radlin gave a shriek and opened fire.

"Honestly, Platt," Tru'eb said, as Platt put on Radlin's camouflage jacket, "I don't know how you talked me into that. You know there's nothing more dangerous than a blaster being handled by someone in a panic."

"Yeah, but there's nobody more fun to pick off than somebody in a panic, either." Platt surveyed the area. "You think there's any more patrols roaming around?"

"Yes. So let's be quick about this."

The dugout was actually situated in front of a deep, man-made fissure that ran straight through the cliff and out the other side. Tru'eb and Platt were pleased to discover that this end of the fissure gave way to a relatively flat area of the forest.

For twenty minutes they made their way over fallen trees and scrub and large rocks. Platt was becoming increasingly nervous. From what she had seen, this end of Zelos didn't really have dusk; the sun just seemed to wink out in the evening. Moreover, the fog was still thick enough that she could see no more than two meters in front of her at a time.

"What are we going to do," she said, stepping in front of Tru'eb and walking backwards, "if we don't find the garrison before nightfall? I don't think that cheap survival shelter has another night's worth of—"

Tru'eb stopped. "Just a moment," he said. "Do you hear that?"

"No. What?"

"Almost a rumbling noise."

"I didn't—" Platt said, and then the ground underneath her disappeared.

She felt herself falling, tried to scream through a dry mouth and clenched lungs, felt a violent surge of blind panic shooting through her entire body—and then a yanking sensation through her right arm as she stopped and dangled where she was. Tru'eb had her by the wrist.

"What ... what was ... what just happened?" she said when Tru'eb had hauled her back up and she was on her knees on solid ground. "Did I just fall off the ... how come I didn't see ... Tru'eb, what happened?"

Tru'eb didn't answer; he was staring over her shoulder, awed. Platt turned around just in time to see a black TIE fighter come *whooshing up* out of the ground about four meters in front of them.

Both of them fell back in a shower of dirt and leaves, the deafening sound of the TIE roaring overhead, and Platt thought the sheer momentum of the thing might blast her into the mountainside. Then, just as abruptly, everything went quiet.

They looked up. The TIE fighter sailed just above tree level and then disappeared.

When the pounding in Platt's head subsided, she looked at what she had stepped off of. The ground ahead looked like an overgrown clearing. But now Platt saw that she had walked right off the edge of a sheer rock face that descended hundreds, perhaps even thousands of meters.

Tru'eb was next to her, staring into the gorge. It was impossible to make out the bottom of the valley, a dark well with layers of fog drifting above it. Plunging down into the darkness, the cliff wall was a marbled gray with steplike ridges naturally chiseled into it. There were also outcroppings along the way, so

heavily overgrown that the plants and trees hung precariously out over the valley; waterfalls poured out of the rock face in a number of places. After several dozen meters everything disappeared into a bluish-gray soup.

Far below, winking on and off through the fog, there was a small blue light. And another, and another, and a hundred, neatly lined up. Platt shut her eyes and then looked again.

“Running lights,” she said, amazed. “But it’s too dark to make out the garrison.”

“Hence, the Valley of Umbra,” Tru’eb said.

“Yeah, I get it. Look at the waterfalls. Twenty credits says that’s a leaky aqueduct.”

“Look there,” Tru’eb said. “Do you see that? There, and over there—all around.”

Platt looked. Weaving in and out of the cliff was a series of metal ladders and walkways, probably leading to maintenance ducts hidden in the rock face.

Tru’eb took her macros. “Six hundred meters down.” He looked up. “And the distance across is twice that. I suppose we can safely say we know where Harkness is.”

Mist oozed up over the edge of the valley. Platt wasn’t sure whether she should be excited or appalled at knowing Harkness’s location.

“There must be a turbolift or a flatbed loader leading down.” Tru’eb said. “You have code cylinders in that uniform, correct?”

“Yes, but I’m not keen on explaining why we’re not at our post. Or why one of us grew head-tails and fangs and the other decided he was much freer as a woman.”

Tru’eb shrugged. “Then it’s straight down.”

“How?”

“We’ll take the maintenance ladder wells. They must eventually lead all the way to the bottom.”

“Suppose somebody’s working on them, genius?”

“Why would they? They have repulsors.”

“Yes, but I’m trying to delay this as long as possible.” She looked at him. “I really don’t want to go down there.”

“But you will.”

“But I will.” She sighed and slid down on her belly, wedged her foot into the cliff face and hoisted herself down. The nearest ladder was about five meters below, according to the macros, but it wasn’t hard to get a foothold on the crags. Before long the two smugglers were standing on a solid, grassy boulder that jutted out over the valley. One of the rusty maintenance ladders, dripping with moisture, stuck out of the rock face nearby.

“I’ll go first,” said Tru’eb, dusting up his hands with dirt and taking a step toward the ladder.

Platt grabbed his shoulder. “Tru’eb.”

“Yes, Platt.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“Harkness is our friend.”

“So what? We have lots of friends.”

Tru’eb stepped onto the ladder. “No, we don’t”

Before Morgan had died, Jai had experienced several incidents in which she had forgotten who she was.

The most prominent of them had happened about eighteen months earlier, when she led a five-man Infiltrator team to Bevell Three on a supposedly well-planned assignment. They were to capture four Imperial agents, but somebody had tipped off the Empire; a squadron of TIE bombers appeared out of nowhere and razed the area. Everybody fell, except for Jai, who walked away without even a bruise. As usual, she got everybody out. But for the first and only time in her SpecForces career, she didn’t get somebody out alive; Leong, the team’s comm specialist, died en route to the medical frigate.

Jai went through the next week completely numb, not responding much to anything or having any sort of recognizable emotion. High Command promoted her to master sergeant and

she didn't object, even though she knew it was a propaganda tool. No Infiltrator assignment should ever have garnered that much attention, but this one had, and on her watch. Still, she accepted the promotion and went on about her routine business.

Then, one day, rummaging through her locker, she found one of Leong's gloves and her heart shattered into a million pieces.

Now, lying on the floor in the dark, Jai recalled that moment with a great deal of distance. As if it had happened to somebody else. The memory was vivid, and she could access the sounds and smells and visions of the time with clarity. No matter how hard she tried, however, she couldn't access the emotion.

What would Leong say if he could see that Jai had let the Imperials take her? Surely he'd be disappointed. But after two months of feeling nothing, suddenly there had been an onslaught of pain, rage, fear, shame—every bit of which was preferable to numbness. For a couple of blissful days, her brain had been so ravaged by the interrogation that she had forgotten to be numb. And now she was back in the same old rut, wishing the pain across her back, the dried blood on her face, the memory of the Imperial soldier swinging the butt of his blaster rifle at her face, any of it would jar her back into emotion.

"I'm starting to wonder if we've been forgotten. Personally I'm kind of hungry."

Harkness's voice, coming out of another world. Jai had to mentally adjust herself. "Huh?"

"I said I'm kind of hungry," he said.

"Hmm," she said dully.

"And that maybe they forgot about us."

That got Jai's attention. "What—you think they left us to rot?"

Rotting away, that was something that wouldn't grant any real emotion, either. Her thoughts drifted back to Bevell Three.

Several minutes later, there was a scraping sound next to Jai's head. Harkness let out a quick, pained gasp.

"What?" asked Jai.

"Sorry. That hurt my eye," he said.

"I don't get what you—"

"Didn't you see the light?"

Jai hadn't seen anything.

"The hatch by the door, it opened for a second—" said Harkness.

"I'm not facing the door," Jai told him.

"But you're near the door?"

"Yeah."

"I think somebody slid something in here," he said.

Jai lifted a sore arm and felt around where she thought she had heard the scraping noise. After a moment she touched something soft and wet. Burrowing her finger down into it, she touched metal.

"I think it's food," said Jai. "On a tray."

"Taste it," said Harkness.

Jai licked her lips; they were metallic and salty with dried blood. "I won't be able to. Anyway, I bet it's drugged."

"You think?"

"You're the prison veteran here. Maybe they want us doped up for some reason."

"For what—another interrogation? They don't need to sneak us drugs for that, not in our condition. They could just come in and—"

Harkness stopped.

"And what?"

"Is it me, or did that food come awfully quickly?"

He was right. It came as if he'd asked for it.

"Oh, great," said Jai. "We've been monitored."

How could they have overlooked that? She tried to think whether she had told Harkness anything about her past missions, or where she was stationed, or anything at all that could be of use to the Imperials. While she was still racking her brains, she heard the door open, and then footsteps vibrating through the floor, right next to her head. Light flooded into the room, and Jai shut her eyes.

Somebody grabbed her by the hair, hoisted her under her arms to a near-standing position.

“Get up, Rebels,” said a man’s voice.

It was familiar, but Jai couldn’t place it, even as she was dragged from the room, even as Harkness began shouting, and his voice trailed off behind her.

Platt and Tru’eb came straggling across the valley floor sometime close to 0600 Standard, Tru’eb estimated. Somewhere beyond the fog and the overhangs he thought he could see the sky turning pink.

Working their way down the cliff had taken the entire night, although everything had blended together in the end; Tru’eb didn’t really remember what the journey had felt like or even looked like. They had just pressed on and on, barely speaking to each other, and when they thought they just couldn’t take another step, they’d do it anyway. Then one more. And one after that. And another. Most of the night had been eaten up in that fashion, and now that the climb was over, Tru’eb felt dazed and dreamy.

He looked to Platt, clambering unsteadily over the rocky ground in her oversized Imperial army boots; she was covered in dirt and white rock dust, and her face was almost gray with exhaustion. Getting across the valley floor was no less difficult than the trip down, as the ground was covered with small, wet, rocky crags.

Platt caught him looking and gave him a wink. Tru’eb smiled back; Platt’s eyes were tired, but clear. The approach of morning was making both of them feel sharper. Moreover, they were both filled with wonder and a sense of brilliant accomplishment. If they didn’t have a greater mission in mind, they would have considered the climb alone to be story fodder for years to come.

*Right, let’s not blow it now,* Tru’eb thought as he heard a loud, raw voice echoing across the valley. He grabbed Platt’s sleeve

and pulled her behind a boulder. A few minutes later the yelling got louder; a squadron of drilling Imperial soldiers came crunching by, the sergeant screaming out cadence. His voice rang off the canyon walls and floor and disappeared way, way overhead.

His men marched on, yelling back in unison. They clambered easily over the rocks, past Tru'eb and Platt, across the deep stream where the waterfalls let out, and finally the troops jogged underneath a landing platform and disappeared around a corner. On a distant cliff wall, a massive flatbed lift sat with an AT-AT on top of it. Two army grunts stood off to the side giving hand signals to the pilots. Standing in the base's weak spotlights, they were a sickly yellow color.

"Small operation," Tru'eb said.

"Pathetic operation." Platt indicated the landing platform. "If this is a standard garrison, there should be a droid maintenance hatch near there."

"Will the droids give us any trouble?"

"No. They're maintenance droids."

"And the humans?"

"We shouldn't have any real trouble finding an unmanned security station. This Sergeant Radlin guy should have enough clearance to at least get a look at a prison roster."

"And then?"

"No idea."

Tru'eb sighed.

"Don't fade out on me now, Tru'eb. You're the one who made us start down the cliff."

"I know. Come along."

They made their way over the rocks and across the stream with considerably less grace than the soldiers had done. But it wasn't long before the landing platform glowed blue over their heads, and Platt struggled to get a code cylinder out of her jacket sleeve with her numb fingers.



The only light source they had had throughout the journey down the mountain was one glowrod, which had gone out shortly before dawn. With the platform overhead, it was almost pitch-black where they were. Platt felt around the wall for what seemed like an incredibly long time before she found a slot and inserted the code cylinder.

As Tru'eb's eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to see a weak seam of light where the door was located.

Something suddenly occurred to him. "I say, Platt—"

"Oh, yessss," Platt said happily, as a swishing noise heralded their way into the garrison. "Let's hear it for the servants' entrance."

"—Don't you think this door is a bit large for just a—"

Both of them winced as the garrison's blinding light shot out of the doorway; Tru'eb was just starting to see again when he heard somebody yell, "Hey! Who's out there?"

Tru'eb's entire body tightened. There was a long silence as he focused on who was speaking: a man in a green Imperial uniform, like Platt's. Beyond him, there were two rows of what looked like a patrol, maybe ten or twelve men, standing in a small docking bay. Beyond them were speeder bikes, neatly lined up and resting on maintenance cradles.

"Um ... coming through," Platt said, stepping inside and pushing past the soldier nearest to the door. Tru'eb followed, his head down. He knew that was completely pointless. There was no way they hadn't been made already, and yet the troopers were shocked into indecision for a moment as Platt made her way past them with stunning audacity.

Finally one of them grabbed her by the arm and said, "I don't think so."

"Run!" Tru'eb shouted, charging ahead. The Imperials around him were still confused, but the ones by Platt were already drawing their blasters. Platt jerked free, right out of Radlin's jacket, and stumbled forward. When she had gotten her bearings

enough to run at a decent clip, she started kicking the speeder bikes off their perches.

Tru'eb followed suit. Blasterfire spattered behind them, over their heads, into the speeder bikes. The soldiers who had gathered enough sense to run after Tru'eb and Platt came roaring blindly across the docking bay and tripped over the vehicle in their paths. *This really is a pathetic operation*, Tru'eb thought as he ducked behind a bike and fired a couple of shots.

Still, the Imperials had numbers on their side, and he could see some of them digging comlinks out of their belts. In a few seconds the whole station would know what was going on.

Tru'eb looked over at Platt, who had situated herself at a computer terminal near the turbolift. He squatted down, got one fist around the handlebar controls of the nearest bike and his other hand on the foot pedal. Then he pressed the activation button and set a random automatic course. The bike lifted off of its maintenance cradle, shook for a second, and plowed straight into a pile of its brethren strewn around the floor. There was a loud popping noise as the whole mess burst into flames.

The blasterfire stopped for a moment. Tru'eb ran over to Platt and ducked behind the terminal.

A voice over the comm unit announced to the entire station that there was a fire in Docking Bay Three.

“ ‘Droid maintenance hatch,’ indeed!” Tru'eb shouted, reaching around and firing at those troopers who weren't busy running for an extinguisher. “Where did you get that one from, Platt? ‘Palpatine's Military Guide for the Recently Lobotomized?’”

“All right, so they changed a few things!”

“A few, yes!”

“Calm down!” Platt shouted. “I found out that there's only one detention level at this place!”

“Where?”

“Level Eight! I already called the turbolift!”

Tru'eb glanced behind them; several meters away the turbolift door was open and waiting. Ahead of them, some of the troops were still trying to return fire and the rest were shouting orders at each other or into their headsets.

"You know it says here that the whole station only outnumbers us a hundred to one? They must have captured Dirk out of sheer paranoia! What do you wanna bet they don't even have a shield generator?"

"Just keep your head down and think up some other grand plan," Tru'eb said, and ran into the turbolift.

Behind him, Platt called, "I already thought of one."

"Fight back! Fight back! Fight back!"

The interrogator's voice came through between waves of dull pain across Jai's stomach. Her hands were free, but she didn't try to stop him.

"In the face of the Empire, you are nothing. The Infiltrators were nothing, and you were a noncommissioned nothing because you didn't have enough brain power to become an officer of nothing."

The pain stopped. Jai heard the interrogator step back and then begin pacing by her head. "Well, I guess this is getting us nowhere," he said loudly to somebody else. Jai lifted her head enough to see the reflections of several gray-suited people across the polished floor. The room wasn't very big; there was a massive desk against the far wall, and most of the rest of the space was taken up by computer terminals. The lighting was soft, almost relaxing. An atmosphere of both utility and comfort. Somebody's office.

The interrogator pushed her head back down with his boot and stood there for a moment. "I am taking my blaster out and setting it on 'kill,'" he announced. "Now I am aiming it at your head, Sergeant Raventhorn."

A moment or two passed.

"I said I'm aiming this blaster set on 'kill' at your head."

Another moment passed.

"Here it goes!"

Pause.

"It's on 'kill'!"

"I heard," Jai said.

He lifted his boot from her head. "Okay, I've decided not to kill you," he said in a tight voice. "But I will when I feel like it."

Another moment passed.

"Oh, get on with the interrogation," said another, exasperated voice. A woman's voice. "I haven't got my whole life to spend watching you annoy her into submission."

"This is how you conduct an interrogation, Major. You show them who's got the power."

"Currently it doesn't appear to be you," the major said. "Interrogation takes control and skill. Which means you're hopeless for starters."

"Oh, aren't you hilarious. Look, I don't care if this is your garrison—interrogations are *my* forte. Why are we even doing this in here? I say we take her downstairs and do this properly."

Footsteps across the floor, coming closer to Jai. "This isn't the same as before," the major said. "I've got a different plan. Did you not read the mind-probe data results?"

"Who needed to? Take one look at her! She doesn't care about anything!" the interrogator said. "You could set her on fire and she wouldn't care!"

"Of course she wouldn't care, idiot. You could set her planet on fire, you could blow up the New Republic and she wouldn't care."

Jai was curled up in the fetal position. The voices of the Imperials disappeared into a loud ringing, which Jai thought was in her head; but then there was a deep, tinny voice in the room announcing a fire in one of the docking bays, and she recognized the sound of a fire alarm.

After a few moments, the alarm died down. The major was finishing off a sentence.

“... See what happens when we bring her mercenary friend in.”

Jai focused on the floor again. There were a few drops of blood near her head, a couple more now, a blemish on the spotless Imperial war machine. It made Jai’s head clear out a little bit. In fact, she suddenly felt lucid.

*Bring her mercenary friend in.*

Jai looked up, past the face of the interrogator and into the face of the major. Their eyes locked for a second, and Jai saw the major’s face register that a fatal mistake had been made. In that instant, it was no longer a question of whether Jai was going to talk. It was now a question of who was going to reach the major’s blaster first.

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At that moment, Dirk’s world was the mezzanine across from him and the ground floor eight stories below him, the view divided by vertical black metal bars. One of the Imperials was trying to bang Dirk’s head on the rails in a vain attempt to get him to keep still. Apparently Jai’s indifference had led the guards to believe that her cellmate would be just as easy to drag to the interrogation chamber; as a result, several blasters lay scattered across the corridor, two officers lay unconscious by the cellblock door, and somebody was screaming for reinforcements over his comlink. Harkness wasn’t sure how many there had been to start with or how many were left. He just knew that he couldn’t manage to get hold of anybody’s blaster, not with his burning, slippery feet sliding out from underneath him anytime he tried to stand on his own, and not with a terrified, unarmed guard shaking him by the collar. Harkness wasn’t sure he could prevent his head from being shoved right through the bars. But then it got worse: the guard gave up on the bars and started ramming

Harkness's head against the floor. There was a resounding pain through Harkness's skull, a blinding ache that shot through his temples, his teeth, his neck.

Then there was the sound of a blaster being fired—no, several blasters—and some shouts. The guard hesitated. That was all Harkness needed. He reached back, got his fingers underneath the guard's helmet, and yanked the guard's helmet clean off.

Now Harkness had something better than a blaster. The guard turned out to be a stocky, blond kid, whose face took on an expression of unadulterated panic as Harkness got up on his knees and started bashing away with the helmet.

"Stop, he's out already, take it easy!"

Someone grabbed Harkness by the shoulder. He looked up, blurry-eyed, at someone wearing white and green, and an unmistakable Imperial cap.

"Back off!" he shouted, swinging the helmet at the person's knees. Whoever-it-was managed to dodge out of the way, and said, "Hey, whoa! It's me! Take it easy!"

Harkness stopped himself. His vision cleared; the Imperial was a platinum-haired woman wearing a fancy white smuggler's shirt and half a trooper uniform. He looked wildly into her eyes, which shifted nervously back and forth as she took him in. "Remember? We're your partners.... We brought you to Zelos."

Someone else appeared behind her, a Twi'lek wearing dark glasses and gray robes caked in dirt. Harkness wasn't sure what their names were, but their manner was familiar; he felt his whole body relax.

"You ..." he said after a moment. "We went to the—didn't you help me nail down a shipment of Imperial blasters? You're Tru'eb ... and Platt."

"Actually, we're Platt and Tru'eb," Platt said.

"You came all this way to get me?"

"We're funny that way. Do you think you can stand? We're going to get you out of here, okay?"

Harkness jerked away, as if he suddenly remembered to be crazed. “No! They took her down the hall!”

“Who?”

“Jai! One of the New Republic agents—they were taking both of us down to the chamber, but she wouldn’t even fight—”

“Which chamber? Where?” Tru’eb asked, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him to his feet. Harkness leaned on Tru’eb’s shoulder with most of his weight; Tru’eb didn’t seem to strain at all.

Which door? Harkness looked down the corridor at the row of black doors to his right; the guards had taken Jai through the one with the large white Imperial seal painted on it, although Harkness could have sworn he remembered being shoved through two red-stamped doors before his own interrogation. Moreover, this white-stamped door turned out to be labeled “Command Center.”

As Platt worked at getting a code cylinder into the slot, Harkness found himself looking at his reflection in the metal doorframe. In fact, several seconds passed before he realized that the reflection was actually his; it blinked when he blinked and moved its head when he moved his. But its face was pale, with a mangy light brown beard sprouting around the hollow cheeks, and the white eye patch was now a filthy gray.

Platt turned around, scowling. “I lost the other code cylinders with the jacket. Anyway, there’s no way Radlin had this much clearance.”

“But you did say you had thought of a plan?” Tru’eb said.

“Yeah, but it had a hitch in it,” Platt said.

“Who cares?” said Harkness. “Tell us!”

“Okay—first, I pretend I’m a prison guard and I tell everyone I’m bringing Tru’eb in as a prisoner. Then we get into a heated fight in front of the Imperials, so that they’re totally confused for half a second, which is all the time we need to stun everyone, get into the cell block, and free Dirk from his cell.”

Dirk and Tru’eb looked at each other, and then back at her.

“Of course that’s somewhat irrelevant now,” Tru’eb said tersely.

“Yeah, see, that’s the hitch.”

Harkness leaned his head against the door. He couldn’t hear anything going on inside, which made him feel worse. He should have known something like this would happen. It wasn’t like it was with Golthan’s people: pick a prisoner, teach him respect, and then forget about him. That was why Harkness’s eye couldn’t be replaced—the subsequent infection had destroyed the nerves. It wasn’t the pain of the torture that hurt the most to remember; it was the sense of being nothing, a brief amusement to be thrown into a cell like a heap of garbage and then forgotten for three months. Certainly he hadn’t been left in solitary, but his cellmates that time were Alliance intentions wimps, and not part of his team. They wouldn’t even help him make any escape attempts.

The sound of Tru’eb’s voice brought him back to the present.

“Oh no. They’re here.”

The four turbolifts on the opposite side of the mezzanine arrived almost simultaneously. One after the other, the doors opened, and Imperial troops and officers came pouring out, all of them armed, all of them running, all of them shouting. Within seconds, Dirk, Platt, and Tru’eb were surrounded.

“Drop your weapons! Now!”

They obliged.

Harkness’s head started throbbing. This is not happening, not after all this, not after I made up my mind...

“Stand down!” somebody shouted.

A new voice. Everyone froze. Two figures were standing in the doorway to the command center.

Harkness blinked a couple of times. He saw a female Imperial major with a red-spattered uniform; her face had flashed into his mind several times since his interrogation, but he hadn’t recognized it until now. Then he saw her.



Jai was as bloody a mess as Harkness. Her eyes squinted in the combination of bright lights and, probably, a splitting post-interrogation headache. There was a thick, red seam across the bridge of her still-bleeding nose; an arm locked around the head of the barely conscious major; and a heavy, Imperial-issue blaster aimed at the major's right temple.

"Stand down," Jai said again. "I have a proposition."

A young, skinny lieutenant spoke. "Let her go, Rebel," he said. "Drop your blaster, put your hands on your head."

"You can't afford to waste time taking us back into custody," Jai told him.

"And why not?"

"Because the Major and I made a little call to the planetary government."

The lieutenant blanched. A faint murmur started up amidst the troops.

Jai went on, "Apparently they aren't amused to find out what's been lurking here in the Valley of Umbra. I think you'd best evacuate your troops before Governor Nul sends a full-blown air strike."

"Don't you think that would be a little paranoid, Rebel?"

Now Platt spoke. "Don't you think the entire population on this planet is a little paranoid, buddy?"

"Aside from all that, I'm giving you an order," Jai said. "Because as of three minutes ago, Zelos II belongs to the New Republic. Isn't that right, Major?"

The major took a deep, rattling breath and nodded faintly.

The lieutenant stared at Jai for a minute, his eyes darting from her to Harkness to the major. It was obvious the boy had never made an executive decision in his life.

"Cut your losses, son," Harkness told him. "Do what the nice lady says."

The lieutenant looked at the floor.

Then he turned around and signaled the troops. "Initiate evacuation procedure. Come on, do it now! Let's go!"

Nobody seemed to object. Some of the grunts closer to the turbolifts had already put their blasters away when Jai had said “air strike.” Within seconds the troops had begun to disperse, some of them swearing, most of them trying to shove through the crowd.

“What about the major?” the lieutenant asked Jai.

“I think she’ll be coming back to my base with me. I also think she’ll be loaning us her shuttle to get out of the valley. You don’t object, do you, Lieutenant? Unless you’d like to come along?”

“It doesn’t appear as though your troops are interested in stopping us,” Tru’eb said.

The boy licked his lips and mumbled something about Docking Bay One, and clearance; then he turned and walked away.

Harkness untangled himself from Tru’eb’s shoulder, leaned against the wall, and took a few excruciating steps toward Jai, who was visibly struggling to keep her adrenaline going in order to hang on to the major. Aside from Jai’s injuries, nothing about her appearance surprised Harkness at all. She matched her voice exactly. And she did look like her sister, a taller, blond version, with the same ice-blue eyes. The only difference was what seemed to be behind the eyes; Morgan’s had been clear and knowledgeable, a window to the brilliance beyond the absentmindedness. Jai’s were bright and painful and hard to look into. Across her left cheek was a long, pink scar, testimony to a wound that had never seen a bacta tank; but in a strange way, it didn’t seem ugly or out of place.

Something inside of him felt oddly settled, seeing her for real.

And in those troubled eyes, he saw a glint of recognition as she finally took a second to focus on his face.

“Harkness.”

“Sarge.”

“You’re ... just as I pictured you.”

“You mean happy and handsome?”

“Here, I’ll take Major Psycho,” Platt said. “You guys lean on Tru’eb. Just concentrate on staying conscious until we get inside the shuttle.”

Jai seemed to noticed Platt and Tru’eb for the first time. “Who are you people?”

“Your ticket off the planet,” Platt said, taking Jai’s hand and shaking it.

At first, Harkness had resisted the idea of being injected with a heavy sedative. He needed to remind himself that he was on board Platt’s ship, the *Last Chance*, already light years away from the garrison, and that the major was imprisoned in the hold. At least that was what Platt had told him. He didn’t remember anything beyond hobbling into the major’s *Lambda*-class shuttle and sinking down into a shiny black passenger seat.

Beyond the concept of taking the sedative, however, he just didn’t want to sleep. In his experience, sleeping drugs tended to pull you down into heavy fever dreams you had a hard time waking up from. And he knew what kind of dreams he was going to have.

“Sorry I don’t have a bacta tank on board,” Platt said, rummaging through the cabinet next to Harkness’s medical bunk. “But it’s only a couple days to Wroona from here. Jai, I’ve got a couple of Rebel friends out there. They can help you contact your base.”

“Thanks,” Jai said. She was lying in the bunk across the room, on her stomach.

Tru’eb came in. “No medpacs in the forward berthing compartment,” he said.

“You’re kidding. I thought we just stocked up on ... oh, here we go.” Platt tossed one to Tru’eb.

“I don’t want to sleep,” Jai said.

“This really isn’t a strong mixture,” Tru’eb told her, sitting on the edge of her bunk. “It’s actually designed to kill the pain while

improving the quality of your sleep. That way your injuries don't interfere with your normal sleep pattern. Which means you are less likely to have vivid dreams."

"Oh. Okay"

"And listen," Platt said, "it's not a big ship. If you need anything at all, press the green button on the side of the bed. Yeah, that one."

"Okay, Tru'eb and I are going to get a little shut-eye—is there anything else you two need?"

"Leave the lights on," Jai said.

After Tru'eb and Platt had gone, Harkness said, "What will you do when you get back?"

"Are you kidding? I just inducted an entire planet into the New Republic. I've got lots of desk work to do."

"Eh. Bag it. Make somebody else fill out the forms."

"Yeah." Jai was quiet for a moment; then her voice seemed to slur. "Maybe when I get back I'll tell General Madine what he can do with this Intel assignment."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe."

Harkness felt the sedative seep into his limbs, warm and heavy. The room seemed to mist over, in the same blue-gray fog as the one that hung over the Valley of Umbra.

"Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"You ever think about becoming a mercenary?"

"Sometimes," she said. Then her voice seemed to gather a little strength. "Yeah, I think that would be pretty nice."

"You said you don't care much about fighting for the New Republic."

"Why? You proposing something?"

"Maybe."

She seemed to drift off after that. Harkness felt the silence tugging at him, but it seemed to be easing him into a warm darkness, not a bottomless well.

Then the humming noise came back.

Harkness started; he felt a surge of dismay. But then he settled back and closed his eyes. It hadn't been a song, or anything to do with Chessa. The humming was the sound of the engines on Platt's ship.

**Hutt and Seek**  
**by Chris Cassidy and Tish Pahl**  
**with Special Thanks to**  
**Timothy Zahn**

Fenig Nabon searched the skies for the ship she knew was on its final approach. But, from her vantage at a grimy window, all she saw was Ryloth's tortured landscape, empty and desolate, stretching into darkness.

She shifted from one foot to the other. The movement betrayed her uneasiness and stirred choking dust in the stifling heat of the port control room. As the veteran of seedy spaceports too numerous to be counted, the Corellian smuggler knew she should be entirely in her element. Instead, the whole deal about to go down left Fen with a queasy stomach and three not so minor questions. Why was she here when she could have been making a simple raava run between Socorro and Coruscant? Why was her beloved ship, the *Star Lady*, docked systems away

on Nal Hutta? And when, in over twenty years of traversing the stars, had she irrevocably and irretrievably lost her mind?

There was one answer to all these questions—Ghitsa Dogder, her current partner of circumstance. Feeling another bead of moisture weave its tortuous way between her well-worn flight suit and her sweat-soaked back, she wished for the millionth time that she had followed her first instinct two years ago and just blasted the little con artist right out of her wildly impractical high-heeled shoes. It would have truly been an act of galactic altruism on par with the destruction of both Death Stars.

Squinting, Fen finally spied a speck of fast-moving light. It materialized into the midsized, heavily armed freighter she and Ghitsa had hired for passage to Nal Hutta. The ship arrowed up and disappeared overhead to cruise above the cliffs housing the Twi'lek clan warrens of Leb'Reen.

Always the victims of pirates and plunderers, the reclusive Twi'leks never made even the legitimate landings easy. For the Leb'Reen approach, a pilot had to fly down a narrow rift carved into the plateau to emerge into the landing cavern five hundred meters below. Harsh gouges made by disrespectful pilots marred the unforgiving rock walls. Fen doubted the Mistryl piloting the inbound ship would make the same mistakes.

Mistryl. These enigmatic women warriors would do desperate things for their impoverished people. And in a universe of uncertainty, getting on the wrong side of a Mistryl was a sure way to meet a really certain, and completely lethal, end.

"It would be a pity if they damaged the ship," said a cultured Coruscant voice.

Fen didn't bother to look down at her diminutive partner. "They won't. Shada D'ukal's a good pilot."

"High praise from you, Fen."

"Simple fact. I didn't say she was a great pilot."

"Or as good as you think you are?" Ghitsa taunted softly.

Fen was too tense to argue with her. "I told you before, conning a Hutt is a bad idea; using Mistryl to do it is a really bad idea."

"Such uncharacteristic understatement for a Corellian." Ghitsa sighed, smoothing back a tendril of spiky blond hair that dared to be out of place. "We have been over this. Mistryl possess a peculiar, tarnished nobility. And ..." she screwed her perfectly applied face in concentration, "they are likely to identify with the seeming predicament of our cargo. We could not count on anyone else to be as predictable."

"They also carry heavy weapons, know how to use them, and don't need a blaster to do permanent damage to a body."

"A Hutt is a big mark in a blaster sight, and a very small one in a con," Ghitsa replied evenly.

They turned from the window as the hum of repulsorlifts echoed in the landing cavern behind them. With a *whoosh*, the ship burst through the gaping hole in the roof of the Leb'Reen landing bay. Fen studied its descent intently with a professional's eye. *Watch out for wind shear*, she cautioned the pilot mentally, as the ship bounced to a final, unsteady stop.

Her partner's crisp words interrupted Fen's musing. "I will finish the details with the Shak Clan." Straightening the shoulder pads of her tailored ensemble, Ghitsa took in Fen's own tattered flight suit and ragged, nut-brown hair pulled into a sloppy braid. "Must you always look as if a rancor dressed you?"

Fen slapped her head in mock horror. "And I ever so wanted to squeeze in an appointment with your designer."

Ghitsa rolled her eyes with amused disgust and, as always, got in the last pointed barb. "You are as hopeless as a Mistryl's cause." Pivoting on a sharp, stylish heel, she walked away.

Fen positioned herself precisely so that the ramp of the ship extended to rest at her big toe. From the bottom, she studied the two Mistryl at the hatch. Tall and not so tall, dark and light,



mature and young, they bore vibroblades, blasters, and the easy confidence of those accustomed to using them.

"Shada, you're lucky you didn't lose your rear deflector when that wind shear caught you," Fen said, in her equivalent of "Welcome to Ryloth."

"It's nice to see you, too, Fenig," the older of the Mistryl returned, calm and unruffled. "I'm sorry to hear the *Star Lady* is still dry-docked. We'll try to make you as comfortable as possible on *The Fury*."

Fen scowled. Shada knew nothing pained a pilot more than playing passenger on someone else's ship. "You know me, Shada. I'll be comfortable anywhere."

Shada moved down the ramp to stand next to Fen. Fen made a point of ignoring the younger Mistryl who followed. To Shada, she muttered, "New sidekick, I see."

"Dunc T'racen," the younger woman identified herself. "And we of the Mistryl don't refer to subordinates as sidekicks."

"My mistake," Fen replied, her voice flat. Dunc bore her Mistryl heritage proudly, but not yet with Shada's smooth competence. Possibly a novice, she speculated. "My partner's over there," Fen continued, with a tilt of her head. "Hammering out the final details with the Shak Clan representative."

Across the Leb'Reen landing cavern, they saw Ghitsa in an earnest, close exchange with an immense, cloaked Twi'lek. Abruptly, Ghitsa spun about and trotted away, swallowed quickly in the darkness of the spaceport. With a flick of his head tails, the Twi'lek stalked after her.

"Where's the cargo?" Shada asked.

"And how much ryll are we talking about?" Dunc added.

"Ryll?" Fen scoffed. "Who said anything about ryll?"

A frown creased Dunc's delicate face. "Given the cost of your Ryloth cargo, we assumed you were moving ryll kor for bacta use."

Fen barked crudely, "*Saltan valoramosa n telval mord.*"

“What’s that supposed—?” A subtle hand signal from Shada, and Dunc swallowed the rest of her question unasked.

“It’s old Corellian,” Shada said, measuring Fen with a cool gaze. “It means ‘assumption is the first step into a shallow grave.’”

“Very good, Shada,” Fen responded, trying to sound casual or even a little sneering, no small feat under that gaze. “But I would have expected better language skills in your younger mercs.”

“We’re not mercenaries,” Dunc uttered with the firmness of one who still believes what she has been told.

Heels tapping a staccato rhythm on the stone floor interrupted them. Ghitsa emerged from the gloom of the landing bay; one by one, five Twi’lek females followed her. Subdued, head tails limp, each shouldering a heavy pack, the Twi’leks padded forward, as if links in a chain, one after another.

“You’re shipping Twi’lek females?” Shada moved closer, her sheer physical presence crowding Fen back a step. “To Nal Hutta?” she added, her voice chilling still further.

“I have a contract, executed by your leadership, that guarantees our passage to the Hutt homeworld,” Fen said, again striving for offhanded casualness. She drew her datapad from her pocket, careful to keep her movements slow and nonthreatening.

“Ladies, is there a problem?” Ghitsa asked pleasantly.

Shada ignored her. “You know we won’t run slaves,” she said icily, her eyes still on Fen. She threw a quick glare at the approaching Twi’leks, who took the cue and stopped.

Ghitsa held out her hand; Fen wordlessly slapped the datapad into her palm. “It’s Shada D’ukal, isn’t it? Pursuant to our agreement, the Mistryl are bound to provide passage from Leb’Reen to Nal Hutta for myself, my colleague, and our cargo.” Her intricately wrought bracelets clattered against the display. “Fee of twenty thousand, nonrefundable deposit of five thousand, contract void if done in aid of the former Empire ...”

“The Mistryl won’t deliver anyone into slavery,” Dunc bit out.

Ghitsa spared Dunc a slitted, reptilian glance before returning her attention to Shada. “Of course you wouldn’t slave. Slavery is illegal under New Republic Senate Resolution 54.325.” She deftly manipulated the pad again. “This is my contract with Brin’shak, the Twi’lek talent agent. He is providing the services of a Twi’lek dancing troupe to Durga the Hutt. Durga will pay these dancers.”

Shada shifted her measuring gaze to Ghitsa. Not that the diminutive con artist would require that much measuring. “Sure he will,” the Mistryl said, her tone clearly indicating how much she believed that.

Ghitsa proffered the datapad. “And pay them very well. Datapage eight, paragraph twelve.”

Shada took the pad and reviewed the contract entry. Not satisfied, she scrolled through the document from beginning to end. Dunc, in a tribute to her training, remained watchfully silent.

The seconds seemed to be dragging on toward forever before Shada finally looked up again. “According to this, eighty percent of the dancers’ pay reverts back to the Shak Clan,” she pointed out.

“The Twi’lek method of compensation is not your concern, Shada,” Ghitsa said loftily. “And if you back out now, you’ll forfeit the deposit, lose the contract, and pay a ten thousand penalty.”

Fen winced inside herself. That was the right lever for moving impoverished Mistryl, all right. And Ghitsa had done her usual expert job of pulling it.

Shada didn’t react, at least not visibly. Her younger partner, though, wasn’t nearly so good. “Shada, we can’t be party to this,” Dunc urged quietly. “Not in good conscience.”

“Conscience?” Ghitsa asked blandly.

Fen couldn’t let that one pass unremarked. “Do you need to look up the word, Ghitsa?”

Ghitsa waved a gilded hand. “No, Fen. I have a passing familiarity with the costly phenomenon known as conscience. Still, if this conversation is going to drift into ethics, I might

point out that our hirelings should not be trying to renegotiate an agreement their leadership executed.”

“The contract appears to be both legitimate and legal.” Shada shoved the pad back to Ghitsa. “But of course we all know what appearances are worth. So I’m going to go talk to Brin’shak and your alleged dancers. If they show any indication of coercion, the deal’s off. Period.”

Shada gave Ghitsa a smile that didn’t make it anywhere near her eyes. “I suppose I could also threaten to report your activities to every law enforcement agency you’ve ever heard of, plus a few you haven’t. But I won’t bother. I’ll just mention that you’ll be in trouble with us. Serious trouble.”

She looked at each of them in turn, as if daring them to protest. “And if the whole thing is legitimate, you’ll pay thirty-two thousand, not twenty,” she added. “Or you can back out right now, we leave, and the contract is void. Your choice.”

“No problem,” Ghitsa said airily, waving toward the Twi’leks still waiting off to the side. “Satisfy yourselves as much as necessary. We have nothing to hide.”

*Sure we do*, Fen thought grimly. *Sure we do*.

“Did you really have to say that the Twi’leks could just rattle around in the cargo hold since they are trained to endure physical pain?” Fen grumbled, strapping herself in for the ride to come. Her partner had quickly moved to Phase Two of their plan and was determined to make the now-committed Mistryl rue the day they contracted with Ghitsa and Fen.

“I did see the wisdom of seat restraints,” Ghitsa conceded, struggling to squeeze her shoulder pads into a passenger seat of *The Fury*’s main cabin. “None of them have been off-planet before. We don’t want them panicking and injuring themselves.”

“Of course not,” Fen said. “Incidentally, the next time you feel an urge to spout off about how an injured dancer depreciates in

value, either don't do it when Dunc's hand is anywhere near a hold-out blaster, or wait until I'm not around. Okay?"

"Given what we have heard of their unarmed combat skills, a blaster would make little difference to a motivated Mistryl," Ghitsa pointed out.

Fen swallowed her retort, preferring to savor instead the familiar thrill of a ship lifting. She felt every pitch and roll as *The Fury* fought the Leb'Reen cavern wind shear, only to emerge into the blistering wind and driving sand of Ryloth's brutal lower atmosphere. Fen counted down the minutes of that wild ride in anxious anticipation.

The moment the ship surged into hyperspace, Fen slipped free of her seat harness. She rose from her seat with a grace borne of thousands of hours logged in flight while Ghitsa was still fumbling with the clasps of her restraints. Eyes darting to the winding passage leading forward, Ghitsa whispered, "You go check on the Twi'leks."

Ghitsa was curled in the most comfortable seat in the cabin, filing a perfect, pink nail when her partner returned. Fen responded to Ghitsa's unasked inquiry, "They're fine." Fen turned her attention to the cabin's computer station, wondering if all of it had been passworded.

A moment later, Shada and Dunc appeared in the cabin, without the slightest sound to warn of their approach. Nodding a greeting, Fen started her mental countdown. She made it to three—a new galactic record—before Ghitsa asked the inevitable question. "So, what do you have in the way of recent holo vid recordings?"

"We're not here to entertain you," Dunc said scornfully.

Shada leaned against the bulkhead, crossing one long leg over the other. From this vantage, she was, Fen realized, able to observe both the burgeoning spat and the score in Fen's own battle game.

"Come now, last we heard, Princess Leia had been kidnaped by that rogue smuggler." Ghitsa rose, and moved across the

cabin to a small holovid recorder. Pawing through the cataloged disks, Ghitsa asked in a pout, "You do not have anything more recent?" She withdrew a disk from a pocket, "How very fortunate that I purchased the last two weeks of downlinked *Coruscant Daily Newsfeed* before we left."

The trip had just taken a horrifying turn for the worst. The Mistryl would be demanding combat allowances.

"Have you checked on your passengers yet?" Shada asked.

"The cargo?" Ghitsa asked airily. "Why?"

Shada sent a cool look her direction, then turned without a word and left the cabin. "How very humanitarian," Ghitsa commented, just loudly enough. "For a mercenar ..."

Annoying electronic theme music interrupted any rejoinders. "Ah, there we go." Ghitsa sashayed across the cabin, forcing Dunc to shift slightly out of her way. "I confess to being an avid Imperial Palace watcher," she divulged.

An image of a human man appeared on the screen. "Welcome to the *Coruscant Daily Newsfeed*. Today's top story, the dramatic kidnaping of Princess Leia Organa by her former flame, Han Solo."

"White is simply not her color," Ghitsa clucked.

Dunc threw Ghitsa a look of obvious disdain as the vid droned on. "And now Organa's brother, Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker, and Hapan Prince Isolder have gone in search of the errant Princess."

"He'll never find them," Fen declared. "Not a chance."

"Of course he will," Dunc countered, clearly being drawn into the conversation despite herself. "A Jedi Knight using the Force—"

"Force, my blaster," Fen retorted, pulling on a loose thread on her flight suit. "He's just a farm boy from a dust bowl."

"A very lucky farmer," Ghitsa murmured. "I wish I'd taken those odds on the second Death Star..."

"I'd say Skywalker has a better chance than anyone of finding his sister," Shada put in.

Fen had not even heard Shada return from the cargo hold. “Unless her ladyship doesn’t want to be found,” the smuggler sneered.

They all started at Ghitsa’s loud outburst of laughter. “Why would that be, Fen? Not everyone is as smitten with the astral General Solo as you were.”

Fen stiffened involuntarily. “Me? Smitten? He could only wish.”

“Is that why there is still a Wookiee-sized bunk on the *Star Lady*?”

“You know I had that bunk installed specially to accommodate your shoulder pads, Ghitsa.” Fen slipped out of her seat. “I’m going to go check on the cargo, make sure they weren’t damaged.”

“I’ve just checked,” Shada told her. “They’re fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” Fen said shortly. “You don’t mind if I look for myself, do you?”

Fen headed out of Ghitsa’s line of verbal fire. Prowling down the passage, she took a turn, stopping at the plate concealing the shield generator. She popped the panel out, pulled a multitool from her pocket, and waited for Shada to arrive.

She didn’t have to wait long. “I don’t think you’ll find the Twi’leks in there,” came the Mistryl’s calm voice.

“No Sithspawn?” Fen peered at the deflector matrix. “Must have taken a wrong turn.”

“You must also be feeling particularly foolhardy today,” Shada warned.

“Oh, come on, Shada. You know I know what I’m doing.”

“Perhaps.” Shada lifted an eyebrow. “On the other hand, would you allow me to tinker with the *Star Lady*?”

“Not while fully conscious,” Fen conceded, pocketing the tool. “Fine. You check the rear shields.”

Shada stepped to the wall and punched a button. A hidden panel slid open at Fen’s elbow, exposing a row of tools. Waving

Fen out of the way, she selected a scanner and probe tip and set to work. "So tell me, Fen," she said. "What is going on here?"

"Should be obvious," Fen said, craning her neck to see over Shada's shoulder. "With that wind shear slamming the ship down stern first and the rough ride out, I figured the shield had probably gone weak back there."

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" Fen asked, trying to sound innocent and sly at the same time.

Shada glanced up at her. "I meant what are you doing with..." She seemed to struggle to find a suitable word, finally gave up. "Her."

"Ghitsa?" Fen laughed. "She's not bad with a datapad, and she can cook."

"And she's got Coruscantan Imperial stamped all over her," Shada said bluntly. "What do you really know about her?"

"Probably no more than you do," Fen countered. "Come on, Shada. I know the Mistryl have her mapped out. Her entry is probably right next to mine in the 'useful but untrustworthy' category."

"She's not Jett, though, is she?" Shada observed quietly, the question really a statement.

A thick, tense silence hung in the air. "That's the whole point," Fen finally replied, her voice dead.

Shada's next words were careful, like a sculptor gently carving a piece of limestone. "Jett Nabon was a man of great compassion."

"And look where that got him," Fen spat. "Dead on the floor of an Ord Mantell cantina, with a bunch of drunks stepping over his carcass for last call at the bar. He might have lived if someone had bothered to pull the vibroblade out of his throat, but nobody showed him any *compassion*."

"His compassion also brought trade to the Mistryl when almost no one else would," Shada continued, ignoring the outburst. "I think that's why the Eleven agreed to this contract



with you, despite their misgivings about your partner. Because we honor his memory.”

“And look where it got you.” Fen pointed over Shada’s shoulder at one of the flux rods. “Make sure you tighten that one,” she said. “It can jar loose sometimes.”

“Already did.” Shada picked up the panel and snapped it back in place before speaking again. “That same compassion compelled Jett to pull a young, abandoned pickpocket off the streets of Coronet and adopt her as his own.”

“Guess you could say that was another one of his mistakes, huh?”

Silently, Shada returned the tools to their wall case. Still silently, she headed forward, leaving Fen alone with her memories.

Since Leb’Reen, Fen could but marvel at how Ghitsa managed to sneak the word “mercenary” or “Imperial” into every exchange with Dunc lasting more than two sentences. It kept the conversation entertaining and far more dangerous than Fen normally preferred.

She and Ghitsa were now waiting in the cabin. Dunc and Shada were forward for their first course correction. The itch to be in the cockpit became an ache as Fen felt the ship drop into normal space. Just when she thought the whole process was taking a bit too long, Shada’s voice called over the comm. “Fen, get up here.”

She was out of her seat and halfway up the passage before Ghitsa caught up.

As they ducked into the cockpit, Shada swiveled around in the pilot’s chair. “I want your opinion on something the sensor sweep turned up.”

A few degrees off the bow a metal cylinder turned lazily on a spindle. An antenna protruded from its top. *Stang*, Fen swore silently. The trip had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

Shada was watching them closely. "It looks like a relay buoy," she said. "Apparently, it's picking up ship signatures as they drop in here."

"Blast it," Fen uttered curtly.

Shada was already bringing *The Fury's* laser battery to bear on the buoy. "Yes. I intend to."

"It's probably too late, though," Ghitsa opined as she eased into the cockpit's rear seat. "Whoever put it there will know soon enough we were here and where we're headed."

"Who would care?" Dunc challenged.

For once, Ghitsa favored her with a straight answer. "Anyone interested in what travels on the smugglers' hyperspace lanes between Ryloth and Nal Hutta."

"Ryll pirates," Shada said, making the name a curse.

"Or worse," Fen said.

Shada deftly moved the targeter on her board. A sure punch and the buoy exploded, for an instant a brilliant orange glowing flower on the canvas of space. "Any particular 'worse' you had in mind, Fen?" Shada asked.

"The Karazak Slavers Cooperative springs to mind," Ghitsa put in grimly. "The KSC used to ambush ships along this line looking for Twi'leks to sell."

"Anyone who does this run will know that a ship from Ryloth will normally change course here," Fen added. "Usually for a jump to the Naps Fral cluster—"

"—And then a set-up there for the final jump to Nal Hutta," Shada finished for her. "Which means that a relay buoy here implies a trap waiting at Naps Fral."

Ghitsa nodded. "The KSC was once very active on this route. Jabba stopped it because he thought too many valuable slaves were dying in the ambushes."

Shada gazed at both of them, her dark eyes thoughtful. Dunc could learn much from that knowing, quiet surety, Fen thought. It was probably why the younger Mistryl had been paired with Shada in the first place.

“Jabba died four years ago,” Shada pointed out. “Were you expecting the KSC to have moved back in here since then?”

“There were reasons we wanted Mistryl,” Fen responded truthfully. “The possibility of the KSC returning was one of them.”

Turning back to her board, Shada nosed *The Fury* in the direction of the Naps Fral cluster. “Well, there’s no going back now,” she said simply. “Looks like you may get your money’s worth after all.”

“No!” Ghitsa protested with a stamp of her shiny boot. “I am going to ride up front. I’m a perfectly capable copilot—”

“Forgot to take your antidelusional medication today?” Fen cooed, pushing past her and into a cockpit seat.

Since the last course change, Ghitsa had harped endlessly on about wanting to be in the cockpit when they dropped into the Naps Fral cluster. She now curled her hands into tiny fists, reminding Fen of an extremely petulant toddler.

“She can stay,” Shada said calmly as she slid into the pilot’s chair. Ghitsa smiled like a child just presented with a space pop. “However,” Shada added in the same tone, “if she says or does anything to annoy me or distract us, I’ll cripple her.”

“Unless I beat her to it,” Dunc added, her eyes on the monitor readouts.

“Give you a cool thousand if you let me do it,” Fen offered.

“I can *too* fly,” Ghitsa stated for the official record, dropping into her hard-earned seat.

“Sure you can, Ghits,” Fen mocked. “Just like the time your nav coordinates would have put us into Corellia’s sun?”

“We would have just grazed the corona,” Ghitsa said defensively.

“How about the time you were shooting at dust because you thought it was draining the shields?”

“It *was* draining the shields.”

“It was *dust*! Blasting dust will just make *more dust*.”

“Put a cleaning rag in it, both of you,” Shada cut off the growing argument. “We’ve got work to do.”

Ghitsa bridled, but fell silent. “Sorry,” Fen said.

“As I see it, our worst-case scenario is that we’ll find an armada waiting for us when we drop in,” Shada went on. “They may try to hit the engines with surgical turbolaser blasts; more likely, they’ll have a heavy ion cannon ready for a saturation disabling.”

“After which they’ll board us, take the Twi’leks, and kill us,” Fen nodded. “Which means they’ll try to be right in front of us or else aligned on our probable exit vector.”

“That was my reading, too,” Shada answered. “So our obvious countermove is to simply come in two or three seconds early.”

Fen swallowed as she pulled up a chart of the Naps Fral system. Most hyperspace entry coordinates had a built-in “safety zone” of a second or two. In-system pilots knew to stay out of the zones to keep from having a ship pop into real space on top of them. Studying the chart, Fen realized Shada had, once again, done her homework. Three seconds would put the ship just outside the zone, probably not too close to anything lethal. *Probably. Hopefully.*

Ghitsa was clearly thinking along the same lines. “Isn’t altering your hyperspace entry point ... dangerous?” she asked in a small voice.

“Very,” Dunc said absently.

“It’s definitely a maneuver with a warning on the box that says, ‘Don’t try this at home,’” Fen forced a quip.

“Stay sharp, everyone,” Shada said. “At my mark. Fifteen, fourteen ...” At five seconds, she squeezed her hand over the levers, and star lines melted to the milky cluster of Naps Fral.

A flash of blue ion fire cut across their bow, the proximity alarm pealed, and Shada pulled *The Fury* around in the direction of the threat. In the span it took for the sensors to tell her what had just tried to paste them, Fen reached over and switched off

the alarms, wondering why anyone even bothered with the priijin things. If you needed them, you were already dead in space anyway. “Kuat *Firespray*-class ship,” she announced through clenched teeth.

“Switching over,” Dunc said, her voice unreasonably calm. *The Fury* shook as a pair of concussion missiles blazed off in the direction of their welcoming committee.

“Fen, find out what the computer knows about Fire-sprays,” Shada ordered.

“Right.”

*The Fury* jerked to port, then rolled starboard as Shada bounced between bursts of ion energy.

At Fen’s elbow, the computer display began spewing technical information. “’Puter says this model’s got a ticklish spot in the port shield,” Fen called. “Right below the stabilizer fin.”

“Stang,” Dunc muttered. “Wouldn’t you know we’d come in on their starboard.”

Shada pushed on the throttle. Still dodging between bursts of ion fire, she lunged straight for the attacking ship. At the last moment, she hauled on the rudder, bringing *The Fury* under the belly of the *Firespray*. There was a sickening crackle of ion discharge and a lurch—

“What does that red light mean?” Ghitsa asked, pointing over Fen’s shoulder.

Fen shoved the other’s rigid arm out of her face. “It means bad,” she spat. “We took a hit to that weak aft shield,” she added for the benefit of the others. “Another hit and we’re in trouble.”

“They won’t get the chance,” Shada gritted as they burst clear of the *Firespray*. Yanking on the throttle, she reversed the forward thrust hard, and flipped *The Fury* back over. The *Firespray*’s left fin magically appeared before them, jutting out from the ship, small and vulnerable. “Dunc?”

“Got it,” Dunc said, fingers flying across the console as she tracked the quivering *Firespray* and, from the sound of it, emptied an entire magazine into the left fin. The *Firespray*’s

shield rippled with the force of the blasts, plasma ebbing and flowing across the ship's hull like a flooded river. Dunc let fly another barrage, and this time the missiles pierced the other vessel's weakening shield. Fire exploded on the ship, scorching its armor. Plates began peeling off the hull like a reptile shedding its skin.

Dunc switched over to the heavy turbolasers. The hot lasers carved through the Firespray's collapsing shield, strafing the ship along its diagonal. Two explosions, one at the cannon and the other near the reactor, and the Firespray, true to her class, erupted in a brief and blazing shower of white, yellow, and red.

For a moment they all sat in silence. "Well," Shada said at last, her voice calm as ever. "That seems to be that. Well done, both of you."

"Not a bad piece of flying, Shada," Fen conceded, trying to get her breath back and wondering why she was so winded. "Though of course I would have done it without losing that aft shield."

To Fen's surprise, Shada laughed. "Fen, you have to be the most arrogant pilot in the galaxy. You want to see if the computer was able to pull an ID before we blew it into the next sector?"

"Let me check," Fen said, keying the computer. A name came up. "Surprise, surprise," she muttered in disgust. "It was the *Indenture*."

"Well, well." Ghitsa murmured.

Shada and Dunc exchanged glances. "Explain," Shada said.

"You need to get out more," Fen said bitterly, "if you haven't heard about the *Indenture*."

"Mistryl don't move in the same exalted circles we do, Fen," Ghitsa scolded, her customary tinge of superiority returning.

"And you can't imagine how pleased we are about that," Shada countered. "Fen?"

"That ship's had more names and ID codes than a Gamorrean has morts," Fen said. "Last I heard, it was traveling as *Salvation*, doing hit and runs for the Karazaks out on the rim."

"Firesprays are mostly used in law enforcement," Ghitsa added. "I understand Krassis Trelix really appreciates the irony of using that kind of ship for slaving."

"And Krassis Trelix is?" Shada waved out at the still glowing dust cloud. "I'm sorry: Krassis Trelix was?"

"Karazak logistics coordinator," Ghitsa amplified. "A very nasty person, even for a smuggler."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Fen added. Shada nodded with comprehension, and maybe satisfaction, too, Fen thought.

"Dunc, let's get those coordinates," Shada said. "Next stop, Nal Hutta."

Fen rinsed the anxiety of the battle from her body. The water was flat and recycled, washing over her like a ritual cleansing that was really nothing more than a tepid sponge bath. She let her head fall forward and rest against the wall, taking a deep breath.

The KSC encounter had not been entirely unexpected. It had been a lucky break in some respects, and disastrous in others. She had done her part. Now it was up to Ghitsa to get them out of this developing jam.

Stepping into another battered flight suit, she ran a comb through her wet hair, slicking it back in what Jett had called her drowned womp rat look. Having already been to Mos Eisley numerous times by age fifteen, she had long ago ascertained how rare a commodity water was there. Her adoptive father had laughed until tears ran down his red face when she had explained that, in the Tatooine desert, water was too precious to be wasted on drowning rodents. Only belatedly had she understood that that had been his point. She quickly checked the small grin threatening to pull at her lips.

At the cabin entrance, she paused, taking in the sight. Dunc was straddling a chair, watching Ghitsa seated near the back

primly apply a new coat of nail polish. The omnipresent holo viewer hummed lightly in the background.

Fen eased back over to the computer terminal. With Dunc distracted and Shada tending to the shields, now was a good time to complete a certain task still on her checklist.

The first eighteen times Shada had caught her, Fen had appeared to be doing nothing more than playing battle simulations. Shada had her suspicions, but, as every female on that ship knew, there was a galaxy's difference between doing something and actually getting caught doing it.

Ghitsa delicately applied a streak of vibrant red to replace the pink adorning her fingertips. Dunc watched with suspicious fascination. "Why are you using such an obvious color?" she asked.

*"Obta su marvalic plesodoro,"* Ghitsa responded.

"Which means?" Dunc countered.

"Huttese," Fen said. "Let them marvel at our splendor."

"It was a favorite phrase of Jabba's." Holding out her hand, Ghitsa admired the gaudy red shade. "Jabba understood the importance of flaunting prosperity to demonstrate power. Since Mistryl have nothing, this is something you cannot understand."

Ghitsa sure wasn't wasting any time. Fen subtly shifted for easier access to her blaster, wondering if a stun setting would stop a truly enraged Mistryl.

But Dunc merely cocked an eyebrow, the same gesture Fen had noticed Shada using on occasion. "You seem to know a lot about Hutts," she said. "One might wonder how that happened."

"Oh, I don't think you're wondering at all," Ghitsa said with a smug, evil smile. "Surely you've read the Mistryl backgrounder on me."

"What backgrounder?" Dunc asked. *Score one for Ghitsa*, Fen thought. Although Dunc's light skin would probably always betray the slightest stress, the young Mistryl was going to have to learn to lie better. She would have to remember to mention that to Shada ... from a couple of light-years away.



Ghitsa had obviously noticed the reaction, too. “Oh, come now, Dunc. Fen’s dear-departed, noble partner dealt with the Mistryl for years. As has Fen.” Her forefinger joined her thumbnail, both colored red. “So what does it say?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Dunc suggested, her voice dark.

“If you insist,” Ghitsa sighed irritably. “Among other things, it says that I am a Hutt counselor. Do you understand what that means?”

Dunc’s mouth twisted in contempt. “It means you’re authorized by one or more Hutts to conduct business on their behalf,” she said. “Like this dancers’ contract between Durga and Brin’shak.”

“A nicely standard textdoc answer, shadow guard,” Ghitsa said approvingly. “But it doesn’t even scratch the surface. Shall I tell you what it really means to be a Hutt counselor?”

Dunc nodded her head slightly to the side. “I’m all ears.”

“Hutt clans appoint counselors to conduct their business,” Ghitsa said. “The skill and loyalty required to manage their complex schemes, plus a Hutt’s own longevity, dictate that counselors remain within a single unit, preferably a family. Dogders have orchestrated Hutt infiltration of Core World businesses for over one hundred and fifty years.”

Fen lifted an eye from the screen. This was news to her, too, if it were true.

“I see,” Dunc said in a cold voice. “What a splendid and honorable family history you have.”

“I don’t need to justify myself to you,” Ghitsa said loftily. “My motivations, and those of my clan masters, should be perfectly comprehensible to you.” Her left hand now completely painted, she switched the brush from right to left, and began reddening her right nails. “Money, profit, security—things even Mistryl ought to understand.”

Dunc snorted. “Except that our principles aren’t for sale to the highest bidder.”

“But that’s the irony of it. They are for sale. They have been sold, you have been sold, like any cheap trinket.” Ghitsa laughed with merry scorn. “Do you really think Mistryl are immune because they don’t deal with former Imperials, refuse to assist in patently illegal ventures, and charge more for the questionable ones?”

Under the terminal, Fen slowly and silently slid her hand down and released the safety on the blaster at her hip. She had no idea how much of this was show and how much the twisted truth. What she did know was that Ghitsa was trying to push the young Mistryl to the snapping point. And that she might succeed.

“For all your exalted justifications of saving your desperate people,” Ghitsa went on, “you’re delivering the Twi’leks to servitude and death as certainly as any Karazak slaver.”

Slowly, deliberately, Dunc uncoiled from her chair and stalked over to the table, her face calm and deadly. Fen got a grip on her blaster butt, but Dunc made no move against her partner except to stand and tower over her like a storm cloud.

“The contract said they were being paid, Hutt,” Dunc bit out, making the word a curse. “You said they weren’t slaves. You’ve lied to the Mistryl.”

Ghitsa raised her eyes to Dunc. “I didn’t lie. They will be paid. And then they’ll be charged; for costumes, board, room, and expenses. At one time, they might have saved enough to buy out their contracts. However, because Twi’lek mortality hovers near seventy percent, Durga now withholds an additional sum to cover the cost of a burial shroud.”

“Shada questioned Brin’shak,” Dunc hissed. “She asked each of the Twi’leks if they wanted to go.”

Ghitsa held her hands out, admiring her work. “In a uniquely Twi’lek way, these dancers do indeed go willingly. They know some Twi’leks must end up in Hutt throne rooms. This is the price they all pay for a lack of power. A Hutt commercial agent will see that the clan is compensated. The alternative is indiscriminate Karazak slaving raids on their enclaves.”

Dunc's lip twisted. "I'd heard that Twileks sell a few of their own to buy a greater peace for them all," she conceded reluctantly. "But you make it sound as if your altruism keeps Karazaks from plundering Ryloth."

"Our altruism, Dunc—we're all in this together, you know." Ghitsa blew lightly on her perfectly marked claws. "I advised Durga it was more cost-effective to go this route, rather than contract with the Karazaks. The KSC is expensive and their slaves tend to be poor quality." She began capping the little bottle. "As I see it, the Hutts purchased Mistryl morality for thirty-two thousand. Karazaks would have demanded at least forty-five. But then, they aren't as desperate as the Mistryl."

Fen cringed at Ghitsa's attack. Perfectly crafted in the words of commerce, she was a humanoid vision of repugnant Hutt excess.

And it had worked, all too well. Dunc stood above her, color rising, the slow boil of a jump's worth of taunts and insults bubbling over, threatening to ignite the fire beneath. She stirred, perhaps about to go for a weapon, perhaps to simply pick Ghitsa up and hurl her bodily across the cabin—

"Dunc, *in aiente*," came a quiet order from the door.

Fen jumped. Ghitsa didn't even twitch. "Hello, Shada," the con chirped innocently. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," Shada said, her eyes on Dunc. "*In aiente*."

Dunc took a careful breath. Then, wordlessly, she pivoted away from Ghitsa and strode from the cabin.

For a moment Shada studied Fen and Ghitsa, her face stiff and unreadable. "We drop out of hyperspace at oh-one-hundred hours tomorrow," she said and followed Dunc out into the passageway.

Ghitsa finally broke the long silence that followed. With uncharacteristic, doubting hesitation, she asked, "Do you think I went too far?"

“Hard to say,” Fen said, working moisture back into her mouth. “If we get out of this alive, I’d say no. If they slash our throats in our sleep, then, yeah, probably so.” She hesitated, weighing her words carefully. “You said some pretty reprehensible things. How much of it was true?”

She grimaced. “Enough. Too much.”

Seeing the little grifter shift uncomfortably in her seat, Fen asked, “Ghitsa, could that be your conscience bothering you?”

Ghitsa made a show of examining her nails. “Of course not, Fen. Merely indigestion. Ship’s rations, you know.”

Fen slipped back into the main cabin just in time to see the holoovid system sputter. Spewing smoke, it coughed out the smoldering remains of Ghitsa’s *Coruscant Daily Newsfeed* recording. Perhaps there truly was a higher power in the universe and she had a sense of humor, Fen thought.

“We’ll be adding the repair costs to your bill,” Shada said, examining the unit.

“By all means,” Ghitsa replied, moving to the holographic game table. “How about a round, Fen?”

“I’ll pass.”

Ghitsa shrugged. “I don’t see why you won’t install a holobeasties game on the *Star Lady*.”

Fen laughed, stretching her arms high. “Let’s just say that the last time I allowed a round on board, my droid ended up with his arms ripped out of their sockets. Besides, we’re about to come out of hyperspace, aren’t we, Shada?”

“Five standard minutes,” Shada said over her shoulder as she exited the cabin. “I’ve already seen to the Twi’leks.”

Ghitsa waited, then whispered, “You didn’t run into her, did you?”

“No,” Fen replied wearily, strapping into her seat. As Ghitsa did the same, Fen let her eyes slip shut. “Won’t be long now.”

“No, it won’t,” Dunc’s voice agreed quietly next to her ear.

Fen's eyes flew open. Dunc was standing to the side, pointing a blaster at the two of them. Fen's blaster, she realized suddenly, belatedly missing the weight at her hip. Her vibroblade, for good measure, was hanging loosely in Dunc's other hand. The girl definitely had talent. "What is going on?" she snarled.

"There's been a change of plan." Dunc said. "Dogder, I'll take that blaster in your boot. Slowly."

"Certainly," Ghitsa said calmly, reaching into her boot and removing a small hold-out blaster Fen hadn't even known she owned. "I don't recall a contractual provision about a blaster in our faces," she added as she slid the weapon across the deck.

"The contract's been changed, too," Dunc said, setting in a seat facing them.

Fen felt the ship tumble into real space. A minute later, Shada joined them. "We protest this treatment, of course," Ghitsa said, getting in the first word.

Shada ignored her. "From the beginning, Fen, your behavior on this trip has been completely irrational," she said. "You convinced us to take this passage; then, at every opportunity, have hounded us that what we were doing was a moral outrage. I want to know why."

"We're just chatty," Fen muttered sourly.

"You wanted us to break the contract, didn't you?" Shada persisted. "That's the only explanation. But why? You can hardly bring suit against us—legally, we don't even exist. Blackmail? Ridiculous."

Ghitsa spoke up. "This is a perfectly legal operation. You renege, and the Eleven will be extremely unhappy with you."

"Having others unhappy with you isn't as bad as being unhappy with yourself," Dunc put in. "We'll take our chances."

"Ah, yes—the wonderful view you get from the high moral ground," Ghitsa said sarcastically. "Not that you gain much of that high ground by shooting two unarmed people."

“We won’t deliver the Twi’leks into slavery, Fen,” Shada said. “Not even a carefully disguised slavery. If you won’t tell us what’s really going on, you leave us with no other alternative.”

She paused, waiting for a reply. Fen kept her mouth closed, her heart thundering as she wondered if Ghitsa had finally made her last miscalculation. If Shada decided that murdering a pair of would-be slavers did indeed count as high moral ground ...

“Very well,” Shada said after a moment. “Time’s up. Unstrap—you’re making the rest of the trip without us.”

The Mistryl silently ushered them aft. It was worse than Fen had imagined. “You can’t be serious.”

Shada swung open a tiny door. “It was your choice, Fen. Into the escape pod.”

Ghitsa climbed in without protest. With her own blaster hovering somewhere behind her back, Fen ducked in after her.

“Good-bye, Fen,” Shada said.

The door slammed, shut and sealed. Like our fate, Fen reflected, before turning on her partner. “Fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”

“What are you talking about? This has worked perfectly.”

Before Fen could utter a properly acidic reply, *The Fury* belched the pod into space. She shouldered Ghitsa out of the way to get to the controls.

Just as she had suspected. There was a tiny ion engine cluster with enough reaction mass for orbital insertion, re-entry burn, and, maybe, something left over for deceleration before touch-, correction, make that *smash*-down. Typical. In her experience, the best pilots always had the worst pods.

The odds of a controlled landing in this vessel were minuscule. The odds of making it alive were only slightly better. All Fen knew for certain was that she planned on bracing herself with Ghitsa’s ample shoulder pads on impact.

“Shada?”

Shada turned her head as Dunc stepped into *The Fury's* cockpit. From the tone of her voice ... "What is it?" she asked. "Something wrong with the Twi'leks?"

"Not at all," Dunc said, sliding into her seat and handing Shada a small holo tube. "They're quite happy. And they seem to have known all along that they weren't going to Nal Hutta."

"Really," Shada said, examining the holo tube. "That's very interesting."

"That's what I thought." Dunc gestured to the tube. "One of them, Nalan, gave me that. Near as I could figure through her accent, she said that 'Fenig-who-is-brave' gave it to her to give to us."

Shada looked out the viewport. The pod had disappeared, caught in Nal Hutta's gravitational pull. "I'll check out the tube," she said. "You'd better run a fast diagnostic on the ship's systems."

"You think we've been conned?" Dunc asked, keying her board.

"We were being conned from the minute we landed on Ryloth," Shada said, carefully filtering her emotions out of her voice. It wasn't proper for a Mistryl to show frustration and bitterness in front of a subordinate. "The only question was in what direction we were being taken."

"Well, whatever direction that was, our former employers seem to have gotten what they wanted," Dunc said sourly. "Except maybe for the escape pod part—oh, *Sithspawn*."

"What?" Shada snapped.

"*The Fury's* ID code." Dunc was furiously pulling up the stored nav coordinates for an emergency leap out of Nal Hutta space. "Fen must have reprogrammed one of the comm systems to create an overlay. We're broadcasting as that Karazak slaver ship, the *Indenture*."

Shada spun *The Fury* around. A blinking comm light signaled a hail from Nal Hutta; she ignored it. "What are we going to do?" Dunc demanded.

“Get out of here, of course,” Shada said. “I have no particular desire to get caught in the crosshairs of Hutt slave politics.”

“No argument on that one,” Dunc said. “What I meant was what are we going to do about our two former employers?”

Shada grimaced. Yes, the Mistryl owed Jett a debt of honor for his friendship to them. But no one misuses such a debt this way. No one. “The galaxy is big,” she told Dunc darkly. “But not that big.”

Dunc nodded. “Understood.”

A Hutt patrol ship appeared, heading in their direction. With a final glance at the muddy planet, Shada pulled the hyperspace levers.

Fen wrestled with the pod, trying to align it so the aft shields bore the brunt of the re-entry burn. “Impact in one minute.”

“Aren’t we going a little fast?”

By way of response, Fen squeezed everything she could from the poor pod’s deceleration system. White, hot fire burned out the window.

“Uh, Fen? The large brown area we are plummeting into? I suggest you try not to land in it.”

“A swamp might cushion our landing, if we don’t drown. Get ready for the cheapest mud bath of your life.”

“You simply cannot be serious.”

“Fifteen seconds,” Fen replied, as she attempted to aim the pod toward a large, muddy swath.

With a terrific, teeth-shattering jolt, they splashed down.

Fen shrugged out of the harness. “This thing’s got flotation pads. They may keep us from sinking right away.” Tugging on the release bar, Fen popped the hatch open. The dreary, gray colors, fetid odors, and mud of Nal Hutta poured in.

Fen clambered out first, and looked quickly around. Swamp. Oozing, oily goo. She jumped in and was immediately enveloped



in slime up to her waist. Ghitsa, however, was stalling at the hatch of the rocking pod.

“Gotta do it, Ghitsa,” Fen called back to her.

She looked out across the swamp. “Well, at least we don’t have far to go. I only wish I weren’t wrecking a pair of designer boots.” With a weary sigh, Ghitsa jumped into the bog.

Slogging through the tangled weeds and stinking mud, they trudged toward a landing facility they had both spotted, some five hundred meters away.

As they staggered onto blessedly dry, hard duracrete, a tusked Whiphid lumbered out of the building. His manner was so casual, Fen concluded that two women missing the landing pad to crash in the swamp was a near everyday occurrence.

Ghitsa and the Whiphid exchanged a rapid-fire mix of Basic and Hutttese, and the Whiphid ambled off.

“Now what?”

“With your best efforts, we have, however miraculously, crashed in Durga’s Clan territories. I told him that I am one of Durga’s counselors.”

“He believed you?”

“Of course. This kind of mishap is not uncommon if you deal on behalf of Hutt clans.” Ghitsa seemed bemused by Fen’s incredulity. “Durga’s estate is less than three hundred kilometers from here. He will be here right away to inspect his new dancers. So we wait.”

They found a cold, pitted bench at the edge of the pad, and sat.

“Fen?”

“Yeah?”

“Are your affairs all in order?”

“My *what*?”

“Affairs, your will, estate, and such, in the event Durga feeds us to his pet dianoga.”

*I definitely should have plastered her on Socorro two years ago,* Fen thought viciously. No money was worth this. “I thought this was going to be the easy part.”

Seated on the bench, Ghitsa’s feet were swinging several centimeters off the ground. “Easy?” she echoed. “Whatever made you think that?”

“I assumed ...”

Ghitsa’s reminder about assumptions and shallow graves was cut off as a low, loud hum reverberating across the sullen marsh. They scrambled to their feet. Squinting, Fen spotted a sail barge moving fast over the quagmire. Its size and sure, smooth movement evidenced the Hutt opulence which was always, to Fen’s mind, incongruous with the dank misery of Nal Hutta.

What had appeared in the distance to be blobs on the barge’s deck devolved into a full complement of heavily armed and undoubtedly fiercely loyal guards of various slobbering species. As the sail barge skimmed to a stop before them, Fen’s fingers twitched at her side, instinctively looking for the blaster that was probably still in Dunc’s hands.

In a mimicry of how Fen herself had met the Mistryl, Ghitsa walked forward to stand at the bottom of the barge’s ramp. An immense Hutt with a large mark stretched across his forehead slithered down the plank.

“Counselor Dogder,” Durga finally rumbled, with a glance at Fen. “I doubt my dancers are hiding in the escape pod I saw on our clan’s property. I expect an explanation for my missing Twi’leks.”

Fen watched in fascination as her partner bent into a low bow. “Your Magnificence, thieving knaves stole your dancers from your most humble agent.”

“Stole?”

With an effort, Fen did not flinch at the malodorous smell wafting from the Hutt. Was it something expelled when a Hutt was angry, she wondered? Or just the remnants of breakfast?

“Yes, Your Corpulence. We were betrayed by those we hired for passage from Ryloth. When we arrived into Nal Hutta space, they overwhelmed us and forced us into the escape pod.”

It was over before Fen could comprehend it had even happened. Durga snapped his grasping, stubby fingers, and five guards surrounded Ghitsa. Fen was now standing squarely, and without cover, in the sights of an E-web repeating blaster mounted on the barge.

“Counselor, I will hear your explanation. And whether it pleases me will determine whether you die quickly, or very, very slowly.”

Fen willed composure. Ghitsa, however, seemed perfectly calm. Or maybe, after a lifetime with Hutts, she was so warped that five slobbering aliens with BlasTechs aimed at her was simply all in a day’s work.

“Durga,” the con artist said smoothly, “if I give you two reasons why you will not kill me, will you pay me seventy-five thousand credits?”

“I will indeed, counselor.”

“First, I hereby invoke the Hutt Commercial Laws, section C, subsection 12.4e, and the protections it affords all counselors and messengers.”

Fen had never been able to read Hutts well, and though she had never seen it before—and doubted she would see it again—she knew that Durga was shocked.

Ghitsa plunged ahead. “You kill me, Durga, and every deal I have brokered on behalf of our Clan is forfeit. At my last calculation, that sum exceeds one-hundred million.”

Anger rippled over the Hutt. Durga bellowed, “You dare cite our own laws to me?”

“You know the law, Durga.” Now, Fen heard steady reason in her partner’s voice. “Counselors and messengers are not to pay the price for those who would use them to embarrass or cheat the Hutt Empire.”

Durga gave his little counselor a long, calculating look, then finally said, "If memory serves, those laws were enacted after the early and violent deaths of twelve counselors and innumerable messengers."

"Your memory is faultless, as always. You will doubtless also recall what occurred when a young, skinny, and very foolish Hutt of the Vermilic Clan forgot this prohibition two years ago and disintegrated his counselor."

Fen was startled to realize even she had heard of that incident. The Vermilics were bankrupted and no Hutt traffic moved for three months. She wondered now if the counselors had refused to broker the Hutt deals.

A long, humid pause strung out before Durga spoke again. "I believe, Dogder, you had a second reason?"

"If you kill me now, you will never regain your Twi'leks."

"Ohhh, ho, Dogder." When Durga laughed, Fen was reminded of a restless, rolling sea. "And just how will you return my dancers?"

"I can give you the ID code of the ship we retained, its itinerary, and ownership registry. You will be able to trace those who have truly wronged you."

Durga's face folded into frowns. "And how will I know if the information you provide me is useful?"

"You may pay me fifty percent now, and the remainder within one standard week," Ghitsa replied. "You will have sufficient time to verify if the data is valuable."

"Do you trust us so much, counselor?" Durga seemed amused. Fen was not.

"I trust you, Master."

Under Durga's thoughtful, raking scrutiny, Ghitsa stood impassively. Then, with a snap of his fingers, the guards lowered their weapons, and Fen found she could breathe again.

Durga put a companionable arm around Ghitsa's mud-encrusted shoulders. "After so many years of loyal service, counselor, you understand that should you prove unfaithful, I am

confident that the galaxy will be too small a place for both you and my anger.”

“I understand, Master.”

“Although I remain disturbed with your failure, I am pleased with your efforts to foresee possible betrayal.” He held out a tiny, groping hand, and Ghitsa gave him the disk Fen had taken from *The Fury*. “You may transfer the sum from our Coruscant account.”

Ghitsa bowed slightly.

Durga’s tail twitched violently, serpentine. “You also know that for the sake of our interests, we permit only credible counselors. Once this transaction is completed, we will look elsewhere for an advisor.”

“You have always wisely insisted that counselors not be the victims of other predators, Master. I ask for no exception in my case.” Fen would wonder for some time whether Ghitsa actually sounded wistful at that parting.

“All right,” Shada said, easing the holo tube into the player. The scan had showed it was a normal holo tube, with no surprises attached. But that didn’t mean she entirely trusted it. “Here we go.”

A two-meter-tall likeness of Fenig Nabon appeared. “Hello again, Shada,” the figure said. “Since you’re watching this, I presume Ghitsa and I are gone. Hopefully still alive, though you’re now probably regretting that you didn’t send us out the airlock without the benefit of vac suits.”

Dunc grumbled in her throat, but said nothing.

“Ghitsa has maintained that you would want to deliver us to the Hutts for their own peculiar punishments,” Fen continued. “If this went down right, she’ll be selling to Durga the Hutt a datacard with detailed information on the ship responsible for the theft of his dancers. A competent slicer will trace that

information back to the *Indenture* and the Karazak Slaving Cooperative.”

The image grinned, a little shamefacedly. “I’m sure you’ve also noticed that *The Fury*’s ID is reading as the *Indenture*. That was my own touch, in case someone on Nal Hutta spotted you. The overlay program is buried in your backup comm system. You’ll probably have to go in through the battle game I was playing to get to it—that’s how I got in—but it shouldn’t be any real trick to disable.”

She sobered. “On the more serious side, you can probably predict what will happen when Durga reaches the conclusion that the KSC stole his dancers.”

“Gang war,” Dunc murmured.

“Ghitsa thinks that in the resulting turmoil both the KSC and the Hutts will leave Ryloth alone for a while. Durga’s slicer should also find certain inconvenient payments the KSC has made to Brin’shak. This will likely be the last Twi’lek acquisition Brin’shak will make for the Hutts.”

The image shifted, foot to foot. A little embarrassed, perhaps? “We’ve told the dancers that you’ll return them to Kala’uun on Ryloth. The Dira Clan is expecting them and can be trusted. The Shak Clan may howl about it, but you shouldn’t get anything but noise from them. They were discredited two years ago in Kala’uun after trying to scam the New Republic over some ryll kor and are generally trying to lay low.

“Finally, assuming you haven’t killed us, Ghitsa will transfer twenty thousand into your account, as agreed. I know you’re expecting thirty-two, but if you play it right with the Dira Clan, they may pay you some ryll kor for bringing the dancers back.” The image smiled, a little smugly. “Ghitsa urges you to sell quickly, as she believes the market will top out soon.”

Fen raised her head, looking out into nothing. “Jett always really admired the Mistryl, Shada. But sometimes he was uncomfortable with what you would do for money. Poverty

makes people desperate, he would say. But sometimes, it's better to be poor. Ghitsa, of course, disagrees."

The image of Fenig Nabon flickered out.

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Durga escorted them to the port city of Billbousa where Fen had berthed the *Star Lady*. They set course for the nearest New Republic facility with a decent banking exchange.

As soon as the ship jumped, Ghitsa slipped out of her cockpit chair. "I'm going to get cleaned up."

When Fen emerged from her own long, hot shower, Ghitsa was already in the cabin, sitting at the cabin's table, intently watching the final chapter in the wooing of Leia Organa. Fen grabbed a bottle of Corellia's finest and two glasses before sitting across from Ghitsa.

"So," Fen began, pouring and sliding a glass across the table to her partner. Ghitsa said nothing, but did accept the drink.

"Did Durga buy it?"

"I doubt it," Ghitsa scoffed. "But he is cautious. He won't part with one-hundred mill without proof and thirty-seven and a half is a small price to pay, for now. All the proof will point to the Karazaks. They are more likely to cheat him than I am."

"But you aren't a counselor anymore."

Ghitsa visibly brightened and took a sip of her drink. "Rather convenient, I thought."

"You wanted this?"

She sighed, tilting her head back against the booth. It was the first time in a while Fen had seen Ghitsa look normal—a simple flight suit, damp hair, nothing caking her face or nails. "You remember how I said that mortality among Durga's Twi'leks was around seventy percent?"

"Yeah."

“It’s even higher for Hutt counselors. Even if a counselor’s own clan won’t kill her, we tend to be excellent acquisition targets for Hutt competitors.”

Ghitsa, Fen suddenly realized, would not have taken these kinds of risks for a mere seventy-five thousand. “And those twelve dead counselors?”

“Two of them were Dogders.” Ghitsa stopped there, lips pressed into a thin, firm line.

Fen veered to safer ground. “Will Durga pay the rest?”

Ghitsa took another swallow. “Maybe. Probably. He’ll be very happy when he finds out about the Karazaks. I expect he’ll give me a bonus.”

They watched as the *Coruscant Daily Newsfeed* gushed about Princess Organa’s impending nuptials.

“Pity about Han Solo,” Ghitsa said.

“Waste of a pretty good smuggler,” Fen sighed, staring into her drink.

The Princess appeared, again in her regal white, announcing that Dathomir would now be open to Alderaani exiles. The program intoned, “And Organa announced today that the New Republic has appropriated two-hundred million in financial assistance for displaced Alderaani. Low-interest loans will also be available to aid in resettlement...”

Fen whistled appreciatively. “Too bad you have to be Alderaani to be eligible.”

They stared at the screen.

“You know,” Ghitsa began, “I’ve always wanted to play impoverished nobility.”

Fen glanced from her partner to the vid, and back again. “True,” she finally said. “And Leia Organa may not look good in white, but, Ghitsa, I bet you do.”



# The Longest Fall

## by Patricia A. Jackson

The Imperial Star Destroyer *Interrogator* maintained its support position, matching coordinate planes and acceleration bursts with its nav computer specifications. From the observation deck, several levels beneath the flight bridge, the commanding officer stared through the transparisteel platform as the *Imperial II*-class Star Destroyer maneuvered into the mouth of a vacuous, black nebula. Gliding from the sinister shadow of undistinguished space, the *Interrogator* was an impressive sight, a precisely honed dagger tip against the starless backdrop of space.

An advanced point ship, his vessel was moving in to investigate a little-known area of space known as the *Nbarqis'I*. The term, despite its romantic appeal, was a crude variation of a word in a lingering smuggler dialect, which he understood to mean “the death place.” Starless, featureless, menacing—the foreboding nebula was a testimonial to seemingly endless continuity.

Chewing nervously at his lower lip, the young captain stared into the faceless void, wishing he could lose himself inside it. The *Nharqis'I* could be no colder or more forbidding a place than the anonymous darkness of Lord Tremayne's waiting room. And the *Nharqis'Al*, a hideous, mythical leviathan said to lurk within the nebula, could certainly be no more terrifying an entity than the Emperor's leading High Inquisitor himself.

In the midst of the sparsely furnished, cruelly antiseptic interior of the waiting chamber, the young captain noticed only one chair sitting against the far wall. He wondered how many Imperial officers had sat in that chair and how many had lived to tell about it. The numbers were quite disproportionate to each other, he was certain, and he congratulated himself on his decision not to sit in it.

Though he was not a superstitious man, the captain was confident that he enhanced his chances of survival if Tremayne should come and find him standing in anticipation of this meeting. He had, in fact, been standing, respectfully at attention, for the past three hours, waiting for the Dark Adept to address him personally.

And if his diligence had no bearing at all upon the outcome of their meeting, at least he would have the satisfaction of meeting High Inquisitor Tremayne and his own potential execution with a small measure of dignity.

*The others died on their feet*, his subconscious told him. Admiral Ozzel. Admiral Ranes. Captain Needa. His esteemed mentor and friend, Captain Nolaan. And there were others who did not directly come to mind. *What makes you so different?*

The inability to answer that question brought a hollow, unsettled feeling to the bottom of his stomach. Claspng his hands tightly behind his back, the young captain swayed back and forth on his heels, an impatient habit learned on the bridge and honed by the daily stresses of commanding a ship in the Emperor's most prestigious war fleet. It was a peculiar fixation on motion that he was working to eliminate and had regulated it

with some success. In any case, the swaying did not trouble him quite so much as the violent tremors that shook his hands.

The captain brushed his fingers over the front of his uniform and straightened the insignia, chiding himself for allowing a physical manifestation of his concerns to appear. The last impression he wanted to make before leaving this world was the empty illusion of fear.

*Fear.* That was not the way to run a ship or motivate its crewmen and support personnel. Fear inspired mistakes, tension among the crew, which accounted for more mistakes and erroneous decisions in judgment. Ultimately, the end result of such tension was failure and more fear. Respect was what they taught in the Academy, respect and subject to authority.

*Discipline is the immediate compliance to all orders, undeviating respect for authority, and above all self-reliance.*

The young captain grinned as the memorized definition came to mind—a recurring echo from his days at the Academy. He remembered the fear of those early days of training, when everything had seemed so beyond reach. He remembered his initial clumsiness with orders and superior officers, the ambiguity of doubt, and the gradual breaking down and reestablishment of his pride. There was indeed a certain arrogance in the mastery of discipline, the mastery of self. There was incalculable self-satisfaction in obeying orders, respecting the High Command, and in being recognized for the ability to think clearly in a crisis. These things combined evoked respect, not fear. High Inquisitor Tremayne knew little of the former and enlisted too heavy a hand in the latter.

The captain nodded in complete confidence. He regretted nothing he had done in the course of his military duties to dismantle, or at least dilute, the fear that High Inquisitor Tremayne inspired. His service record and that of the personnel aboard the *Interrogator* was without blemish, asserting, at least in his mind, that respect was a superior motivation to fear.

Meeting Tremayne's orders with a thin smile and consummate bowing of the head had made him one of the most distinguished officers in the Fleet. No other would be so bold as to even meet the Jedi's menacing face, with its equally sinister cybernetic replacements. And while the captain's efforts were met with cold disdain and neutrality, he persevered, hoping to influence the Emperor's infamous servant with a small measure of his loyalty and willingness to serve.

"What did it matter?" he whispered, startled by the sound of his own voice. The captain paused, cocking his head to one side as the echo reverberated between the narrow walls of the waiting chamber. Chiding himself for the outburst, he pursed his lips as that hollow feeling dug itself deeper into the pit of his stomach, where the root of all his suppressed fears had lain dormant, until this ignobling day.

Indeed, what did it matter? His relationship to the deceased Captain Nolaan was an unwritten blight on his reputation, one that would inevitably doom him. And his fate would be no different than the others who had been Nolaan's trusted advisors and formal companions. High Inquisitor Tremayne had made that distinction very clear, starting with Nolaan's summary execution on the bridge of the *Interrogator*. And in the aftermath, not one who had called Nolaan friend and mentor was alive to mourn him, except for himself. And that was soon to change.

Vharing swallowed convulsively, remembering Tremayne's wrath. He shuddered with the recollection of Captain Nolaan's gray, stricken face as the troopers dragged his body from the bridge and into the corridor for expeditious disposition. If Tremayne's justice was as predictable as the black void of the *Nharqis'I*, he was next in line.

He straightened the collar of his uniform and adjusted the tilt of his cap. A patriotic cant learned during his tenure at the Imperial Naval Academy came to mind and the young captain took a sudden rush of optimism from the words. The power of those memories instilled him with the courage to face Tremayne

as he would face any man in a position of power—with respect and deference rather than fear. After all, it was not his command that had sent a full squadron of Imperial TIE bombers to the cloudy, defenseless world of Qlothos.

His subordinate, the ambitious senior lieutenant, had picked up some peculiar signals from the nearby planet. It was a frequency that nearly matched a set of earlier transmission codes that had been intercepted from an Alliance operative. Suspecting a hidden Rebel garrison, the senior lieutenant sent the TIE bombers to destroy it.

All this had transpired while the captain lay asleep in his bed. He was only awakened by the lieutenant after the facts were collected and the casualties calculated. There were only minimal injuries to report, no damages to craft or equipment. But nearly sixty civilians, most of them prominent Imperial citizens, were dead—among them a high-ranking Kuat Drive Yards engineer, his wife, and two sons, who were on holiday in the capital.

Evidently, the cloudy blanket of atmosphere covering the planet played havoc on the identification beacons built into the concussion missiles. One went astray and demolished a secluded section of the residential community, which lay only a kilometer from the suspected Rebel compound. Hours after the fatalities were counted, Lord Tremayne's summons had come through directly. And without the added apprehension of his military aide to share in his inner torment, the captain came to meet with the High Inquisitor alone.

But now, he regretted that decision. The briefest contact with another human, however succinct, might have eased his anxiety and given him something to dwell on besides this impending meeting.

The industrious senior com-scan officer would have been an excellent choice. A family man and father, he was an incessant talker—one reason the captain had overlooked him as his military aide. A loyal and competent leader, the com-scan officer always had time to devote to the love of his wife, nearly three

hundred light-years away, and to the newly born child he had never seen, except through holos and rare face-to-face transmissions.

The balance seemed to anchor the talkative officer in a way the captain had come to admire and finally resent. But after today, all that would change. After assuring High Inquisitor Tremayne that the ambitious senior lieutenant would be punished to the fullest extent—court-martialed, convicted of manslaughter, the destruction of Imperial property, and harassment of loyal Imperial citizens—the captain would promote the com-scan officer as his new advisor and begin to share in this esoteric life.

The door to Tremayne's chamber abruptly opened. The captain turned curtly on his heel and saluted as the Jedi stepped into the room. "High Inquisitor Tremayne, I have a full report into Senior Lieutenant Leeds's blundering—" His voice was arrested by the lancing pain that assailed his throat.

As the invisible grip intensified, the captain fell to his knees. He winced as the small bones at the base of his skull cracked audibly under the pressure. Unable to breathe, he found himself sprawled on the cold glare of the waiting room floor. He closed his eyes in an effort to compose himself.

His mind began to flounder for lack of oxygen, and he remembered the stress exercise at the Academy where his colleagues and he were subjected to a panic test in a room full of noxious fumes. Half blinded and nearly unconscious, he was the last to emerge—the only one with the courage, or foolish pride as many called it, to remain longer than any of the others. But in this new test, there were fatal consequences. Here the captain was fully cognizant of what was happening to him. There would be no noxious fumes to dim his senses and lessen the blow. He could feel every sensation in vivid detail, from the cold kiss of the deck plate against his palms to the coarse fabric of his uniform as it chafed his elbows and knees.

Unable to raise his head and beseech Tremayne for a second chance, the young captain could only stare into the flowing black hem of the Jedi's robes. As his consciousness waned, he imagined himself being drawn into that black fabric and into an alternate world as dark and starless as the *Nhargis'I* nebula surrounding his ship.

*What a fitting end to my life*, he thought with numb pleasure. The first small bone broke beneath the pressure and he felt his body relax.

Born into a prominent bloodline and class, Jovan Vharing attended the Imperial Naval Academy, a decision made for him by traditional family dictates rather than of his own accord. But there were no regrets to that course, and he delved deeply into the best of himself to impress mentors and superior officers alike. For his concentrated efforts in detail and accuracy, he graduated in the top two percent of his class—a distinguishing achievement. Newly commissioned as a lieutenant, he went on to a prestigious posting as senior tracking officer aboard a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer.

His ambition and eye for competent and cost-effective action made an early reputation for him—then a newly graduated officer, serving in the desolate Outer Rim, in the area of space commonly referred to as the wild frontier. And while it was no auspicious duty for an officer of his caliber, it was to be a short-lived tenure with many notable accomplishments that would earn him the sympathetic eye of Captain Nolaan. Having also served on the Outer Rim as a junior officer, Nolaan took an instant liking to Vharing. To spite several of his junior officers, Nolaan called in several favors and arranged for Vharing's transfer—to the bridge of the *Interrogator*, where he made no attempts to shield his partiality.

Within one year, Vharing would live up to the high expectations set for him by his ill-fated mentor. After Nolaan's

untimely execution, Vharing became one of the youngest men to achieve the rank of captain. As such, he would be one of the youngest officers to ever receive command of an Imperial II Star Destroyer. And with it, he inherited the burden of Tremayne's exacting demands and the resentment of every Imperial officer on the bridge.

Death was a shadowy cloak surrounding the captaincy of the *Interrogator*. Promotion was by succession—the kind of succession one sees in a toppling house of sabacc cards. Vharing's promotion to captain was simply a complicated ploy by his executive colleagues to stay well out of Lord Tremayne's omniscient shadow. Vharing, as did his predecessor, would serve as a buffer. When the next blunder surfaced, when the next inaccuracy arose, his would be the name spoken by Tremayne and his would be the neck crushed by the wrath of the High Inquisitor.

So, as with all things, Vharing threw himself, mentally and physically, into the endless pursuit of perfection. His was the highest efficiency rating in the fleet and his men the most steadfast and loyal. At a formal dinner for the executive staff of the *Interrogator*, Vharing was forced to fend off the curious inquiries of his fellow officers, who for the last six months had stood by and gawked in envy of his ability to motivate men and support staff, even under the most extreme circumstances. When asked what was his single, greatest achievement, Vharing replied, "Serving under High Inquisitor Tremayne."

A moment of quiet met the comment; the jovial atmosphere usurped by a darker, fearsome mood. Staring at each other and then at Vharing in turn, the assembled Imperial officers were speechless and deferred to the talents of their more outspoken members.

"Are you insane, Vharing?" General Parnet whispered. The disgruntled officer glanced over his shoulders, as if expecting High Inquisitor Tremayne to be nearby in the shadows, listening.



“Oh, come, gentlemen,” Vharing scolded, raising his goblet in a toast. “The man is not so dreadful as all that—oppressive, demanding, unforgiving. He’s no different than our drill mentors back at the Academy or any of the superior officers under whom we served before our grand appointments to executive commission.”

“And there’s your mistake, Vharing,” Parnet said evenly. His cruel, handsome face was as expressionless as the shadows flanking the corners of the room. “Failure at the Academy was expulsion. Failure in the line of duty oft times means reassignment to some shameful task, demotion, perhaps court-martial in the worst cases. Here—” He put his goblet down to candidly decline the toast to Tremayne. “Here the penalty for failure is death. And that my friend, is the longest fall any man can take—alone or with his friends.” Parnet paused and glanced around the table at each of his colleagues in turn, waiting for a consensus from the group.

“Well spoken,” Lieutenant Uland concurred. He swallowed the entire portion of his wine and set the goblet aside as the first warm charge rushed through him, warding off the intoxicating chill brought on by Tremayne’s name.

Vharing met Parnet’s statement with a thin smile, marveling at the black mockery of fear behind the General’s insipid eyes. “Then to Death, gentlemen,” he raised his goblet, “the longest fall.”

As Vharing’s face met the cold embrace of the deck floor, he was as a dead man. Hot surges of agonizing sensation lanced through his battered skull, and he awoke from that desperate state—alive by every indication of the pain that swept through his heightened senses.

With a child’s wondrous delight, he experienced the sharp agonies of living—the nagging aches and stiffness of his joints, the twisted pinch of his uniform, chafing uncomfortably at his

skin. One of his insignia pins had broken in the fall and was piercing the muscle of his chest. *Dead men do not bleed*, he thought to himself, feeling the warm adhesive of his blood against the fabric of his uniform.

There was a dull roaring in his ears as his physical faculties returned. A momentary stab of pain confessed itself to be a separated rib, possibly two, suffered in the fall to the waiting-room floor. His right index finger would not move on command and any effort to coerce it brought a secondary wave of sensory anguish. And there was more. Something was terribly wrong—he could not breathe.

In desperation, Vharing searched the room, his lethargic eyes slow to focus on his surroundings. The delay in his vision brought terrifying images back to his bewildered brain, making the few objects in the immediate area seem gigantic in comparison to his frail, battered body. This appalling effect redoubled his terror, prolonging the agony of his asphyxiation.

*Why doesn't he finish it!* Vharing demanded in his mind, unable to speak. His throat was on fire. The salted aftertaste of blood repulsed him and caused him to gag, aggravating his desperate circumstances.

Then as his will to survive conquered the army of dull sensations numbing his brain, Vharing opened his mouth. The frigid chill of the waiting room sliced at his tongue as he took his first gasp of air. The experience was a miserable agony to endure; the icy sting swept through his mouth and then into his nostrils.

Vharing coughed, continuing to wheeze as his lungs began to function. “Alive?” he rasped, startled by the hoarse growl of his voice. *Had Tremayne left him for dead? Impossible.*

Slowly rising from the floor, Vharing swallowed with deliberate caution. He closed his eyes, near fainting, as the agony in the back of his neck intensified. There was undoubtedly some damage caused by Tremayne’s wrath, but nothing the surgeon droids in the *Interrogator’s* sick bay could not fathom. Spreading

his fingers wide and wiggling his toes inside the hardened leather of his boots, Vharing grinned and turned for the door.

Pausing momentarily, he stared at his reflection in the observation glass, noticing the thin trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth and from one nostril. Quickly pulling the handkerchief from his pocket, he moistened the corner and dabbed at the wound. The injury at his chin would bruise by morning, but he was not worried. He would wear the bruise as a mark of distinction among his colleagues.

Hurrying through the bulkhead door, Vharing stepped into the corridor and abruptly fell back against the wall. The overhead illumination grids were blinding to him. Hands shielding his eyes, the young captain blinked back painful tears and quickly made his way through the wide passage. His heart was pounding frantically in beat to the patriotic cant that still lingered in his memory.

Everything was so poignantly clear. The detail of the deck plates, an organized mosaic of tiles along the corridor floor. Though indiscernible to the preoccupied mind, he could see the variations in shade and texture. The illumination grid panels troubling him from overhead were spaced exactly one and one half meters apart, two meters in the corners where the corridors intersected, and three meters where the passage led off to the enormous labyrinth of the officers' quarters. A sanitizing chemical taint rose in the air, stinging his nostrils for the first time as his heightened senses allowed him to experience, with fullness, the world around him.

Yes, everything was exquisitely clear to him, including his plans for Lieutenant Leeds! He would call a complete escort of Imperial stormtroopers to accompany him to the bridge. Then he would head directly to the command center and he would arrest the ambitious lieutenant in front of everyone. And at the expense of several favors of his own, he would oversee the court-martial procedures himself. Admiral Hennat, as yet a keen friend of his, would gladly preside over the entire affair, insuring a judgment of

gross negligence against the lieutenant. Leeds would become the scapegoat, buried in a list of charges ranging from murder to treason, while Vharing's own record remained perfectly clean and clear.

After snapping the restraints on Leeds's wrists himself, the young captain would summon his com-scan officer, Lieutenant Waleran front and center. With great ceremony, befitting a field promotion in combat, he would advocate the industrious young officer to the rank of senior lieutenant in front of the entire bridge crew. And as Nolaan had done for him, Vharing would take Waleran under his wing, insuring him a place on the executive staff as his personal military aide.

At the end of the corridor, the turbolift was situated between an auxiliary maintenance shaft and a small storage room. Closing his eyes, Vharing rubbed at his neck, barely able to tolerate the excruciating pain, which seemed to intensify as he moved closer to the turbolift. His hands gently caressed the area under his throat and he felt the disfigured swelling of his larynx and the distended glands along the sides of his neck.

*Nothing the medical droids can't see to*, he told himself. His tongue was also swollen, all but blocking the airway to his lungs. Vharing paused, leaning against a heavy equipment chest. Loosening the collar of his uniform, he swallowed a cool draft of air, in the hopes that the chill might alleviate some of his discomfort.

Puzzled that he had not yet reached the turbolift, the captain fought off a bout of panic. His heart quickened as he opened his eyes. For every step he had taken, it appeared as if the lift entrance had moved three steps beyond him. Vharing closed his eyes again, rubbing the sensation back into them as the numbing cold of Tremayne's waiting room prevailed over his senses.

"Delirium," he whispered, willing the tension and anxiety to leave him.

When Vharing again opened his eyes, he was standing on the bridge of the *Interrogator*. What a breathtaking sight she was—a tribute to the perfection and dedication of the Imperial

technicians that created her! Lieutenant Leeds was nowhere on the flight bridge. Vharing smiled with conceited satisfaction, reminding himself to pay a visit to the destitute officer, if only to offer a few choices as to his next career, as foreman in one of the Emperor's spice mines.

Vharing nearly laughed aloud at the thought. Brushing his hand reflectively over his lips, he took a deep breath and clasped his hands behind his back. He swayed rhythmically back and forth on his heels, conscious of the habit but too intrigued with the rapture of living to care.

Across from him, Lieutenant Waleran was speaking with the navigation team. A set of new insignias adorned his uniformed breast, casting a steady, proud glare over the dramatic gray of his formal command appointments. It pleased Vharing to see the newly promoted Senior Lieutenant so fully engaged in his work and enjoying it. He seemed well at ease on the bridge and from the atmosphere, the crew was at ease with him, too.

Ahead of them, the nebula was breaking up into fragmented sections of discernible stars and distant planets. The bridge crew was preparing to leave this sector, bracing themselves for the jump into hyperspace. When had the order been given? Shrugging off that uncertainty, Vharing straightened his broad shoulders. He wanted to pose for the crew to show his complete confidence in the new bridge officer. In his absence, Waleran must have received the orders and was prepared to carry them out.

Vharing raised his chin with a measure of pride. The action caused a crippling streak of pain to shoot through him. There was a literal explosion of sensory information at the base of his skull as his brain shuddered in agony. Gritting his teeth against the anguish, the captain forced his body into a rigid pose. Once he had given the order for the jump into hyperspace, he would officially turn the bridge over to Waleran and would retire immediately to the medical bay for a complete physical examination.

As the pilots signaled the all clear for the jump to hyperspace, Vharing opened his mouth to give the command—a loud, tortured wheezing escaped his throat. He tried to swallow but the tightness in his throat would not give. Lieutenant Waleran turned to him, as if looking through him, and then turned back to the pilots' station. Straightening his shoulders in a haughty imitation of his commanding officer, Waleran nodded to his subordinate and gave the order for the jump to hyperspace.

Vharing winced beneath the onslaught of the hyperdrive engines as the shriek of the motivators jarred his bones, right down to his teeth. There was a secondary explosion of light and color as the telltale points of stars elongated and stretched across the viewscreen, becoming the seamless fabric of hyperspace. As the radiant glow intensified, Vharing squinted, desperately afraid to close his eyes against the brilliance. For to close them would mean never to open them, never to see this world, or exist within it again. But the glare was too intense, the pressure at the base of his skull too powerful. He was forced to escape into a world where there was no light, no sound—just blackness.

Neck broken, his spinal cord pulverized at the base of his skull, Captain Jovan Vharing was dead. His head swung listlessly back and forth from his shoulders as two stormtroopers dragged his corpse from High Inquisitor Tremayne's waiting room.

# **Conflict of Interest**

**By Laurie Burns**

Standing on the steps of the Verkuylian Imperial Governor's Hall waiting to present her fake credentials to the stormtrooper at the door, Selby Jarrad took another swipe at the sweat trickling down her temples and wished she'd been warned about the blasted stink.

Just another “minor” detail Intelligence had neglected to mention during the mission briefing, she thought. The city—the whole sweltering *planet*—reeked of alazhi being stripped, pulped and simmered for refinement into bacta. Of all the attacks that the New Republic team might face while helping Verkuyl's rebelling native workers oust the Empire, this obnoxious olfactory assault had never come up.

She slanted a glance at the tall, dark-skinned man beside her. Before landing, the stiff, formal collar of Major Cobb Vartos's business suit had been crisp and clean, but it had long since wilted in the suffocating heat. Grimy marks showed where he'd pried it away from his perspiring neck. Selby didn't even want to

know what she looked like. Her own suit clung to her, and the thick auburn hair piled atop her head felt hot and heavy.

"I'm not sure which is worse," Vartos murmured to her, hooking a finger in his collar and giving it another yank. "Breathing through my nose and smelling the blasted stuff, or breathing through my mouth and *tasting* it."

Selby had a definite opinion on that, but just then the stormtrooper at the door barked "Next!" Vartos stepped up to the portal and handed the guard his forged ID. Carefully schooling her expression into the cool, professional mien of a corporate bidder—or at least as cool and professional as she could manage with hair sticking damply to her face and sweat trickling down her back—Selby did the same.

The stormtrooper scanned the cards. "Purpose of your visit?"

"My associate and I are here to present a proposal to His Excellency, Governor Parco Ein," Vartos told him. Since the Governor currently had a hall full of bidders waiting to present him with business proposals, Vartos didn't bother to add that the only proposal he and Selby intended to give Ein was: Surrender, or die.

When Ein had advertised he'd be considering bids for the construction of a new bacta refinery on Verkuy, Intelligence had deemed the situation too good to pass up. The planet's native workers, encouraged by the slow but steady reduction in Imperial might in the three years since Endor, had finally indicated their willingness to openly rebel.

And in this case, the Republic's new allies would come with a bonus. Though Verkuy was sparsely settled and a bit too far out on the Rim to be strategically valuable, Selby knew the New Republic considered military support of the coup a small price to pay to bypass the hassles of dealing with the bacta cartel and gain a direct pipeline to the medical resources. The Governor's Bid Party offered the perfect opportunity to insert an Intelligence team into his presence—combined with the military threat the



fleet would present when it jumped into the system, orchestrating his surrender should be a snap.

Selby felt another drop of sweat meander down her spine as the stormtrooper seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time checking their credentials. His white armor gleamed brightly in the sun as they stood there, sweating under his blank, black-visored gaze for what seemed an eternity. The uneasy silence lengthened. She exchanged a glance with Vartos and knew he was thinking the same thing when suddenly a voice behind them broke in.

“Excuse me—is there a problem?”

She turned. The new arrival, a lanky, fair-haired man dressed in the dark blue uniform of an Imperial aide, regarded them quizzically from the sidewalk.

The stormtrooper snapped to attention. “Sir, they say they’re here for the Bid Party, but I haven’t been able to confirm their authorization to attend.”

“I see,” the man said, coming up the steps. “Your names?” He briefly consulted a small datapad. “You’re on the list,” he confirmed. “It’s all right, Sergeant. Let them pass.”

The stormtrooper nodded, stepping aside as the massive Hall door swung open. Inside, marvelously cool air welcomed them, and a copper-colored droid dotted with tiny green, rusty-looking specks glided forward to take their travel bags. *This awful humidity*, Selby thought. *Even the droids are affected.*

“I’m Daven Quarle,” the man said, extending his hand first to Vartos, then to her. “I’m His Excellency’s aide in charge of the refinery project.”

Selby shook it, noting that Quarle’s grip was firm, with hard calluses ridging his fingers. Not a mere bit-pushing bureaucrat then; this man was accustomed to work—and quite a lot of it.

Intelligent green eyes sized her up, as well. “So, you’re the two from GalFactorial,” he commented as they boarded the turbolift, en route to their rooms on the fifth floor with the other bidders. “Your company has a reputation for doing good work. But,” he

cocked an eyebrow as the lift started to rise, “I hear the refinery you people built on New Cov ended up coming in over budget. That true?”

“Of course not,” Selby said, suddenly grateful that whatever omission Intelligence had made regarding the smellier aspects of refining bacta, she *had* been thoroughly briefed on her cover story. “Midway through construction, the client decided to change the venting system so the plant wouldn’t vent to the outside. Obviously, redesigning at that point was difficult, but the client insisted, so the budget was readjusted and approved.” She gave him a blandly professional smile. “In the end, the project actually came in *under* the revised budget.”

“I see,” Quarle murmured. “I’m glad to hear that. His Excellency always appreciates a creative bit of number-crunching.”

Selby looked at him sharply, uncertain how to interpret the remark. She decided to change the subject. “If you don’t mind me asking, how many other companies sent bidders for the project?”

That eyebrow quirked again. “Curious about the competition?”

*Not really*, she thought. *Concerned about innocent civilians*. Although the crowd gave them more opportunity for cover, she didn’t like having to worry about the bidders’ safety. The mission had been carefully planned to be as bloodless as possible, but accidents could—and frequently did—happen.

“A little,” she answered out loud. “Actually, I wondered if there’d be an opportunity to present our bid to the Governor in person. I find it’s beneficial to personally explain the numbers to prospective clients.” She caught his eye meaningfully, held the look. “Our clients often find it rewarding, as well.”

“Ah,” Quarle said, inclining his head knowingly. He understood the covert language of a bidder wishing to offer a bribe. “As it happens, you’ll be able to meet His Excellency later this evening, at a special reception we’ve planned for the bidders.

And those who wish to—” he hesitated “—to *privately* discuss their bids with Governor Ein may make an appointment to meet with him. Perhaps sometime tomorrow?”

Selby considered. Tonight, Claris would help members of the Verkuylian resistance set fuses around the planet’s main comm transmitter tower as her fellow operatives set in motion their own explosive plans at the Hall. Tomorrow, she’d signal the fleet and then destroy the Imperials’ only means of calling for backup once Selby gained entrance to Governor Ein’s office to offer him the New Republic’s “bribe.”

Which, being a savvy public official skilled in the art of self-preservation, and further encouraged by the military might which would have just arrived to orbit persuasively overhead, His Excellency would, of course, accept.

She smiled at Quarle. “Tomorrow’s perfect,” she said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

And if it weren’t for the necessity of keeping up her guard, she might have managed to relax and enjoy herself—at least a little, Selby mused that evening as she and Vartos stepped into the Hall’s open-air central courtyard where the reception was being held. If Verkuyl’s dubious charms this afternoon had lived up to the planet’s reputation as an Outer Rim backwater, their comfortable, well-appointed rooms and this gracious gathering tonight could do a lot to change her mind.

The sultry purr of smooth jizz poured over them, and from the looks of the buffet table along the far wall, the Governor was a generous, even lavish host. With sunset, the jungle humidity had at last become bearable, and the decorative tile underfoot and the fancy, fashionable garb of the bidders would have been right at home in any of the corporate ballrooms on Coruscant.

Except—it stank. Even in this beautiful setting, outside of the Hall’s blessedly closed air system, the smell of simmering alazhi was impossible to escape.

“Let’s split up, shall we?” Vartos murmured, eyes on the corner bar fountain spilling some kind of dark red drink into a shallow pool. “It’ll be easier to slip out that way.”

Not that he’d be slipping out for his reconnaissance of the Hall until he’d thoroughly reconnoitered the reception, Selby thought, amused. After all, they did have covers to maintain. “Sure,” she agreed. “I think I’ll check out that buffet myself.”

Three hours, two plates, and endless bidder chitchat later, she paused under one of the courtyard’s graceful archways to glance back at the swaying dance floor. It had steadily expanded in direct proportion to the shrinking bounty of the buffet table and the Governor’s free booze supply. Bidders moving to the soulful wail of a bass viol filled nearly two-thirds of the courtyard, while the rest of the party had begun wandering through the arches and into the Hall proper.

Which made it a perfect time to do a little wandering herself.

She didn’t dare use the turbolift beyond the fifth floor, where most of the Bid Party attendees had been given rooms. But even so, finding the Governor’s office on the top floor proved no problem, as Intelligence had very thoughtfully provided a map. Shoes in hand, she crept up the Hall’s quaint staircase, discovering and dismantling half a dozen security sensors before reaching her destination. It took only a moment to unfasten the tiny eavesdropping device, a silver-toned stud indistinguishable from the dozens of less useful ones decorating the neckline of her stylish blue evening gown. But getting the thing past the security sensors, sentry cameras, and the guard in front of Ein’s office proved a bit more difficult.

In the end, she was reduced to enlisting the aid of a housecleaning droid, which—having either not noticed the silver stud arcing through the air to plunk neatly into the Governor’s wastebin or programmed not to care—obligingly carried it right past the guard and deposited it under Ein’s desk. Selby waited until the droid finished its housecleaning, repacked its cart, and

disappeared into the turbolift before she slipped back down the stairs to rejoin the reception.

She never made it.

Hurrying across the tenth floor's polished landing, Selby heard the turbolift's doors unexpectedly slide open behind her. *Burnin' stars*, she cursed, stomach sinking. *Did I miss a sensor?* Still meters away from the safety of the stairwell, with nowhere to go and no choice but to brazen it out, she turned to face the new arrival.

Daven Quarle.

They both stopped short in surprise. Green eyes swept over her, noting the shoes she held in her hand and lingering briefly on the gown's decorative neckline before settling on her bare feet. Selby, holding the hem of the dress nearly to her knees to facilitate her scurry down the stairs, hastily dropped it and covered her toes.

When Quarle looked up again, his eyes glinted—with suspicion, or amusement, Selby couldn't tell. "Bidder Jarrad," he said politely. "If you're looking for your room, I believe you have the wrong floor."

"Um, no. No, I don't," she said, thinking fast. That thumbpass in his hand—"I mean, I appreciate your concern, but I'm not really lost."

Quarle said nothing. She hurried to explain. "It's such a nice night, and the stars looked so pretty from the courtyard. I thought I'd go up on the roof and enjoy the view."

He raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't taking the turbolift be easier?"

"Well, of course. But—" She shrugged and played her hunch. "It wouldn't take me all the way up, so I found the stairs and started walking."

"I see," Quarle said, eyes dropping again to the shoes dangling from her fingers. "As it happens, these stairs don't go up to the roof."

"Oh," Selby said, trying to sound disappointed. "Well ... it was just a whim. Never mind." She started to turn away—

“Wait.”

She glanced back. Quarle regarded her thoughtfully. “It is a nice night,” he agreed. “And the view from the roof is spectacular. I can take you up there, if you like.”

Selby studied his expression, wondering what was behind the offer. Did Quarle suspect her of lying, and want to get her someplace dark and private to quiz her more thoroughly—or worse? Or was it something far less sinister; just a simple invitation from a man to a woman to go stargazing?

It bothered her, a little, that it had been so long since the last such invitation that she could no longer tell when one was being offered. The demands of working Intelligence kept most people at arm’s length—or farther. *I ought to at least find out what he wants*, Selby told herself. *If he is suspicious, the roof might not be such a bad place to deal with the problem.*

She made herself smile brightly at him. “Sure. I’d like that.”

The short ride up to the roof was made in silence, and outside the air was still and stiflingly warm; a shock after the comfortably cool Hall. But overhead, a thousand-thousand stars glittered like tiny jewels strung on garlands in the heavens—a spectacular sight, as Quarle had promised.

They stood near the carved stone railing—Selby carefully keeping just out of his reach—and gazed out over the city. She located the main comm tower rising out of a small ring of lights about a kilometer away, and wondered if Claris and her team had finished rigging the explosives. If all went as planned, by this time tomorrow evening Verkuyt would be back in the possession of its original owners.

“Seem a long way off, don’t they?” Quarle said.

“What?” She turned, looked at him sharply. “Who does?”

“The stars,” he said, giving her an odd look. He waved his hand in a gesture that took in the jeweled sky. “They seem so far away, but in terms of interstellar trade, they’re just a hop, skip, and a jump away—so close you can almost reach out and touch them.”

“Oh,” Selby said. Apparently he had brought her up here solely to stargaze. She looked up, too. “ ‘The miracle of hyperspace,’ ” she quoted, not sure what else to say. “ ‘Linking a hundred-thousand worlds together in a galactic village.’ ”

“That it does,” Quarle agreed, gazing overhead. “Which one’s yours?”

Selby scanned the night sky for a glimpse of Averill, but the starscape was completely unfamiliar. “I don’t know,” she confessed, surprised at the absurdly pleased feeling the small talk engendered. “It’s out there somewhere.”

He smiled, too. Without that reserved, watchful expression, he looked younger; perhaps only a few years older than herself. “Where are *you* from?” she asked.

“Here,” he said. “Bacta bred, born, and raised. Never even been off the planet.”

“Really,” she said, mind clicking over his words. If Quarle was a native, then his parents had been among the original migrants who’d come to the planet as shareholders in Verkuylian BactaCo, a lone contingent which somehow managed to form its own enclave apart from the bacta cartels. Quarle’s parents were probably among those workers who’d turned their backs on their colleagues and joined forces with the Empire when it had arrived to nationalize the company. And, given his position in the Governor’s office, no doubt he was among the ones who had looked the other way as their former co-workers became little more than slaves, no longer producing bacta for their own profit, but for the imagined glory of the Empire.

In short, the kind of loyal Imperial citizen the rebelling workers she’d come to liberate widely regarded as a traitor.

Selby reminded herself that, given her fake ID and the convincing packet of professional lies that comprised her cover story, Quarle believed her to be a loyal Imperial citizen herself. “You’re the right man to ask, then,” she said, deliberately steering away from that topic of conversation. “Does it always smell this... this *bad* here?”

Quarle laughed out loud. "I barely notice it," he told her, "but then again, I've lived here all my life. I'm not sure I even have a sense of smell anymore."

"Lucky you." She grinned. "The first whiff out the hatch just about knocked me flat."

He laughed again. "Verkuyl will never attract the tourist trade, that's for sure." He paused, staring out over the city. "But while we won't ever be mistaken for the bright center of the universe, there are lots of things which could be done to improve the situation here," he said, abruptly serious.

"Such as?" Selby asked, curious in spite of herself. Just how did Verkuyl's Imperial masters envision molding the future of the planet they had stolen from its rightful owners?

Quarle looked at her a moment as if deciding how to answer. Then, apparently reaching a decision, he relaxed against the stone railing. Behind him the comm tower's distant lights cast reddish glints off his golden hair, and beyond the tower the absolute blackness of Verkuyl's vast alazhi jungle stretched to the horizon.

"The Governor has several ideas, most of which are very sound," he began, and though Selby had expected no less, she was somewhat disappointed when he went on to recite the standard Imperial line. She couldn't quite dismiss the nagging feeling he wasn't truly convinced though. So when he paused, she said, "Now. Tell me what *you* would do if you were in charge."

Quarle favored her with another of those long, assessing looks. Selby forced herself not to flinch as he stepped closer, narrowing the distance between them. "You really want to know?" he asked, voice low, standing so close their shoulders brushed.

Pulse abruptly pounding and all senses alert to any sign of attack, Selby nodded.

Quarle stared at her intently a moment more. Then, slowly, he folded his arms across his chest and eased back against the railing. "All right," he said, looking away. "What *I* think is that a



new approach is needed—an aggressive expansion that'll ultimately offer Verkuyl more economic independence in the galactic community, give us more security, and address some of the concerns the workers have been voicing lately.”

He glanced over, gauging her reaction. Intrigued, Selby relaxed against the railing herself and settled in to listen. Encouraged, he started to go on, but was interrupted by a discreet beep. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, pulling a comlink from his pocket. “Yes, what is it?”

“Daven, it's Jorli,” said a voice Selby recognized as belonging to a junior aide on Ein's staff. “I'm sorry to bother you, but the reception's pretty much wound down except for a few party-hards who won't take a hint. I turned off the fountain and got the droids stacking chairs, but they still won't leave. Should I call Security?”

“No,” Quarle said with a sigh. “Leave them to me. I'll be down in a moment.” Repocketing the comlink, he looked at Selby ruefully. “I'm going to have to cut this short. Duty calls.”

“It always does,” Selby said. She straightened up, too, wondering if perhaps—“Would it be all right if I stayed up here a little longer? It really is a beautiful view.”

“Sorry, no,” he said. “You'd need a thumbpass to get down the lift, and I don't have any extras. This one's keyed to me—nontransferable.”

“Oh. Okay.” Not that she'd really expected he'd give her free run of the Hall. Selby shrugged. “Well, then. Shall we go?”

The ride down was as quiet as it had been on the way up, the brief moment of camaraderie gone. Quarle courteously escorted her to her room, bid her a polite good evening, and strode away. Sternly resisting the urge to watch until he'd disappeared into the turbolift, Selby shut the door behind her. This was one of the worst parts of the job—when an enemy showed himself not as an adversary, but a decent-seeming person who just happened to be serving on the opposite side.

She sighed. In her line of work, it was easier to see everything in black or white, friend or foe, than to attempt sorting out all the shades of gray. Color blindness was often healthier, as well. Agents who hesitated to silence their foes often found that their newfound “friends” did not hesitate to silence them. Working Intelligence meant keeping the battle lines clear, and the enemy firmly fixed in your sights. There was no room for anything else.

*Too bad*, she thought. Something about Quarle—his concern for the workers, perhaps—told her there was more to him than met the eye. Not that it mattered, of course. She knew where her duty lay. She sighed again, turned around. From the doorway connecting their rooms, Vartos regarded her with a frown.

“Everything okay?” he asked. “You were gone quite a while.”

“Fine,” Selby reassured him. Walking over to the bed, she sat down and began pulling out the decorative combs that secured the neat crown of curls atop her head. Auburn locks slipped down about her shoulders. “We okay to talk here?”

“I checked it out. We’re clean.” He took a few steps further into the room. “Did you get it set?”

“Uh-huh.” Selby inspected the combs on the coverlet before her. Picking one up, she touched a fingernail to a certain spot and activated the receiver. They listened. Silence. She nodded in satisfaction. All quiet, as it should be. The eavesdropper awaited tomorrow.

Suddenly, a faint squeak broke the quiet. She and Vartos exchanged a glance. Another squeak, accented by the scrabble of tiny claws. Selby grinned. “His Excellency appears to have a skitter problem.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t have an appetite for shiny little snacks.”

“They don’t eat metal,” she told him. “It’s about the only thing they *don’t* eat.”

“Good.” He studied her briefly. “So, what happened with that aide, Quarle?”

“He caught me coming back downstairs,” she admitted. “I thought there’d be trouble, but it seemed to work out all right.”

Vartos looked relieved. “Well, if you had to get caught, good thing it was him. He’s in a good position to bail you out.”

Selby frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Bail you out—cover for you. Make an excuse why you’re someplace you shouldn’t be.” Vartos gave her an odd look. “Didn’t he ask what you were up to?”

“I told him I was trying to get up on the roof to see the stars.”

“And he bought it?”

“He seemed to.” She looked at him, still frowning. “Why would he cover for me?”

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Vartos said. “As far as you know he knows, you were just wandering around the Hall because—” he grinned “—you wanted to go stargazing?”

“That’s what I said,” she gritted. “What did you mean—”

“Sel, he’s on our side,” Vartos said gently. “He’s with the Verkuylian resistance.”

She caught herself before her jaw dropped. “He is?” It took another moment to digest the news. “Then he knows all about us,” she said. “He knew the whole time what I was up to.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Vartos said. “You know how these things are set up, Sel.”

She nodded, still taking it in. Members of resistance cells almost always had nominal contact with each other, and limited knowledge of what was going on in order to reduce liability. That way, if one Rebel was compromised or caught, the damage to the overall group could be kept to a minimum.

She thought about it a little more, recalling her initial impression that Quarle wasn’t quite what he seemed. “That takes nerve, playing both sides that way,” she said, rethinking their conversation on the roof in light of this new information. “He’s got a tough hull to patch passing himself off as a loyal Imperial.”

“So do we,” Vartos said, rather tartly. “And unless we absolutely need him for something, we’re going to keep on treating him like he *is* one. Time enough *after* the coup to compare notes on your respective undercover careers, Sel.”

The admonition was hard to miss. “Of course,” she said, slightly hurt that he’d think anything else. “You can count on me to put the mission first, sir.”

“I know.” He studied her a moment longer, nodded once, and changed the subject. “So. Here’s what the security setup on the lower levels looks like.”

He launched into a description of sensor panels, guard posts, and hidden cameras. Selby listened, grateful her brain was kept busy visualizing the Hall layout rather than replaying that evening’s encounter with Quarle. Wondering if the duplicity inherent in carrying off his masquerade gave him any difficulties. Whether it was ... lonely ... living a life split between ideals and duty, unsure who to call friend and who to call foe, but all too sure he could not let his guard down with either.

Realizing the direction of her thoughts, Selby forced her mind back to the task at hand. As Vartos had said, time enough for that sort of thing later.

Or perhaps there would have been, if things had turned out differently.

Selby listened to the whispers from the tiny speakers concealed in her ornamental earsculpts as she sped up to the Governor’s office the next morning. What she heard sent her stomach plunging as surely as if the turbolift’s floor had suddenly dropped out from beneath her. Which, in a sense, it had. Claris, waiting at the comm tower for Selby’s signal to hail the fleet, had just been captured.

And in the short space of time that it took Governor Ein to be informed of the arrest, and for Selby to overhear it before the eavesdropper’s signal abruptly cut off, their carefully crafted plan went to pieces. The loss of Claris shattered it as effectively as a change in cabin pressure microfractured a ship’s brittle hull.

For that first stunned moment, Selby felt panic freeze her mind as she watched the floor indicators flash past, carrying her

ever closer to her meeting with the Governor. Claris captured, herself only seconds away from the stormtroopers sure to be awaiting her arrival at Ein's office—

Then a hot surge of adrenaline thawed the frost and sent her brain scrambling to find a way to salvage the situation. *Think*, she ordered herself, damning the eavesdropper for cutting out just when she needed an ear in the Governor's office the most. Was there any way she could stop the lift, get off it, and find a way to warn Vartos?

She bit her lip. Without a thumbpass, no. Not before first making a stop on the Governor's floor. The guard below had entered her destination, notified Ein's office she was on her way up, and keyed the lift for nonstop.

*But there are other ways of making an exit*, she thought, glancing up to confirm the presence of a maintenance panel in the lift's ceiling. She could knock out the panel, climb into the shaft, and go ... where? Her hand, reaching for the lift's controls, hesitated—

And then, suddenly it was too late. The doors slid open.

Selby froze. Two stormtroopers stood opposite the lift, blaster rifles resting imposingly on their white-armored shoulders in traditional parade-ground stance. She stared at them. They stared back, seemingly in no hurry to take her into custody. Inside, hope battled with caution. Could it be that they didn't know?

She couldn't just stand in the lift forever. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out. Boldly, she announced: "I'm here to see His Excellency."

The stormtroopers just stared at her without responding, but off to the side a golden-eyed protocol droid snapped to attention. "I'm sorry, but the Governor is unable to see you now," it apologized in an officiously smug manner that made Selby suspect it delivered this particular speech quite often. "Unexpected business has come up that requires his immediate attention. May I reschedule your appointment to another time?"

“Oh, I suppose,” she said, trying to look annoyed at the delay. Still not quite believing her luck, she agreed to a time and re-entered the turbolift. As it sped back down to ground level, she steeled herself to tell Vartos there had been a change in plan. As the mission’s commanding officer, it would be up to him to decide what course of action that change required.

For just a moment, she allowed herself to think about Claris, now in Imperial custody—an Intelligence operative’s worst fear. Then the door slid open, and she set out in search of the generator room where Vartos waited for his signal to cut power to the Hall. If they hadn’t been before, the Imperials were monitoring electronic communications now for sure. She’d have to deliver this message in person.

But as it turned out, she didn’t have to. Vartos already knew.

Hands in the air and a grim expression on his face, he stood pinned against one of the humming power-relay boxes. He turned his head to look at Selby as she slipped in, and she had her own blaster out and in her hand before the situation really even registered. But the stormtrooper holding the blaster rifle on him didn’t even glance her way. He didn’t have to. Before she got her weapon up to firing position, a harsh voice from the side ordered her to drop it.

Selby froze midaim and slowly turned her head to look. A short distance away, Daven Quarle had his hands half raised as he stood between two rows of power relays. Behind him, the second stormtrooper’s blaster rifle now pointed in her direction. “Drop it! Now!” the trooper repeated forcefully.

Selby risked another glance at Vartos. His eyes met hers, and in their grimly resigned depths she could see he understood her dilemma.

As it stood now, with the whole New Republic team captured and the fleet not called, the mission was doomed to certain failure. Without the fleet to encourage his surrender, Ein and his stormtroopers would simply crush the rebelling workers, and the

three—no, the four of them, counting Quarle—would be interrogated and then most likely killed.

However, if she went ahead and took a shot at Vartos's captor, it would probably result in her commanding officer's immediate execution, but if—and it was a big if—Quarle over there was as quick-minded as he'd seemed and thought to divert the second stormtrooper, she just might manage an escape during the ensuing firefight.

And if she got free, there was still a chance she could—somehow—call the fleet.

*You can count on me to put the mission first*, she'd said to Vartos.

She'd meant it.

Raising the blaster, Selby fired.

The next few moments were a blur. As she dove behind a metal control box that offered meager cover, the room lit up with blasterfire. Across the room, Vartos crumpled. Pinned in place and uncomfortably aware of the blaster bolts sizzling close all around, Selby kept shooting anyway until the first stormtrooper went down. Then, twisting to aim at his comrade, who was crouching behind a metal box of his own, a movement to the side caught her eye.

It was Quarle, edging stealthily along the wall toward their only means of escape, the door. Something else caught her eye as well—

"Daven—watch out!" she shouted, and fired. The bolt sizzled into a small panel on the wall a scant few dozen centimeters before him. The lights blinked out, blanketing the room in darkness.

And this was it—her only chance.

As if on cue the door slid open, illuminating her path to freedom. Momentarily silhouetted, Quarle slipped through to safety in the corridor beyond. Aiming a wild smattering of cover fire in the stormtrooper's direction, Selby got to her feet and darted after him.

She almost made it unscathed. Just as she reached the door, a blaster bolt grazed her outstretched arm, sending jagged claws of hot pain streaking up to her shoulder and forcing out an involuntary cry as she stumbled into the corridor beyond. The door slid shut behind her, the faint sounds of the trooper's fire slamming uselessly against the metal barrier.

Alerted by her cry, Quarle turned back. Suddenly nauseated, and dizzy by the burning pain, she faltered just outside the door and struggled to get her bearings. "Which way?" she managed from between gritted teeth.

Quarle hesitated, but far behind him down the corridor, two stormtroopers rounded the corner and the question suddenly became moot. Her arm felt engulfed in flames, but she managed to fire a few discouraging bursts their way before turning to run. As blaster fire echoed down the corridor, she felt more than heard Quarle close on her heels.

They hadn't gone more than fifty meters before he pushed her firmly to the right and slapped at a door panel there. Selby let him guide her, bursting into a long, narrow room with no doors other than the one they'd just come through. "Where're we going?" she demanded, pain making the question come out harsh.

"Somewhere safe," Quarle said, just as shortly. He felt along the blank wall on the far end of the room while Selby restlessly prowled, scanning the room for possible avenues of escape. She was relieved to be out of the immediate line of fire, but with no apparent way out, that relief was sure to be short-lived. And the stormtroopers would be here any moment—

Turning back to Quarle, she was startled to see an old-fashioned swing door in the far wall where she was positive none had previously existed. "Hurry up," he said, and proved the door wasn't a mirage by pushing it open and stepping into the darkness beyond.

Selby hastened into the narrow passage beside him, and watched as he did something at a panel set in the back of the



wall. The light streaming in the open door suddenly changed. When Selby looked through it to the room beyond, it was like looking through a gauzy curtain.

She flinched as the door at the far side burst open. One at a time, two stormtroopers leapt into the room with weapons at the ready. But astonishingly, they spared no more than a cursory glance at the far wall. She realized then that they must see the same blank wall she'd seen when first entering the room, and looked at the gauzy curtain with new respect. Holoflage—some of the best holoflage she'd ever seen—concealed the secret door from prying eyes.

"I'm impressed," she murmured tightly as Quarle shut the door, flicked on a glowrod, and led the way down the dark passage. Her arm throbbed with each step. "Very impressed. How did you know it was there?"

"Old family secret." He glanced briefly over his shoulder. "My grandfather was Corlin Quarle Deld."

A moment later, the name clicked. "Verkuylian BactaCo's principal owner," she said, and he nodded. Selby nodded, too, as the pieces fell more neatly into place. No wonder Quarle masqueraded as an Imperial while secretly plotting revolt. His family had owned the whole planet before the Empire took it over.

She thought of the holoflage and felt a renewed stirring of hope. "Got any other family secrets I'd like to know about?" she inquired.

Quarle paused before a door. Beyond, the passage disappeared into darkness. Crouching, he shined the glowrod on a dusty keypad and punched in a series of numbers. A lock snicked, and he opened the door to reveal a tiny room.

"I might," he said finally, locking the door again behind them. "But we need to figure out what we're going to do here. It's obvious that whatever plan you and your partner came here with has fallen apart, and my cover's been blown as well. At this point, just getting out alive seems the best we can hope for."

"That's not good enough." Selby shook her head. "If I can get word to the fleet, there's a chance we can still pull this off."

Quarle looked at her sharply. "The fleet?"

"There's a small New Republic battle force nearby waiting for a signal from Claris—or rather," she amended, "a signal from me, before jumping in. Once it shows up, unless Ein has a Star Destroyer or two hidden in his back pocket, he'll have no choice but to surrender."

"I see," Quarle said slowly. He gazed off a moment, thinking, then slanted her a faint smile. "And no, he doesn't." The grin faded as his eyes went to her injured arm. "Why don't you tell me what's going on while we take care of that burn?" he suggested. "We'll figure out where to go from there."

The medpac he produced contained only the mildest anesthetic, so Selby was just as glad to focus on describing the mission as Quarle gently cleaned the burn and slathered a viscous green gel over it. "Unstabilized alazhi," he said at her doubtful look. "Not quite as effective as refined bacta, but it'll certainly help."

It did. The cool gel soothed the burn and, as it hardened, provided a protective coating which made bandaging unnecessary. Selby flexed the arm experimentally, relieved to find the movement elicited only a dull throb of protest. "So," she said. "What do you think?"

"It's *your* arm." Quarle raised an eyebrow. "What do *you* think?"

"The arm's fine," she said, giving him a faint smile in thanks. "I meant, what next? Can you get me access to a subspace comm unit?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully and sat back. "Probably," he allowed, then paused. "One question, though. What were the fleet's orders if it never got a signal? Send someone to investigate, or just go on home?"

"They wouldn't abandon us," Selby said. "They'd try to find out what happened."

“So someone would eventually show up to find out why the signal never came?”

“They wouldn’t abandon us,” Selby said again, feeling a twinge deep inside that, on the uncertain chance she could salvage the mission, she had basically abandoned Vartos back there in the generator room. She knew that if she failed, Intelligence would eventually send someone to investigate, but at that point the mission would simply mean extracting the surviving team members, if there were any, and pulling out. Vartos and Claris would have been lost in vain, the rebelling Verkuylian workers would be purged, and the Empire would win—perhaps permanently. Without enough support from the workers who were left, the New Republic would probably not return.

“I see,” Quarle said. “So it’s call the fleet now, or never get another chance.”

“Looks that way,” Selby agreed. She hesitated. “I’m sorry—this could get a lot messier than originally planned. If Ein starts rounding up workers, using them as hostages ... we can still win, but victory may come at a higher price.”

Quarle’s cheek twitched. “All things worth having usually do.”

“There could be fighting, in orbit or on the ground,” she warned. “Will it be worth it to you?”

He looked at her. In his eyes, she saw grim acceptance.

“I want what’s best for Verkuy,” he said. “If bloodshed is what it takes—” He looked away. “I’ll regret it. but I’ll learn to live with it.

“Now.” He abruptly changed the subject. “I can think of three subspace comms we might be able to get to. Let’s figure out which one would be best to try for....”

If she’d known of all the Hall’s hidden passages last night, Selby reflected as she followed Quarle down a narrow corridor, getting up to the Governor’s office undetected would’ve been as easy as shooting mynocks off a power coupling.

The Hall had proven a virtual warren of hidden passages. Quarle's grandfather had been a careful, one might even say paranoid, businessman—which was fortuitous, given the present circumstances. It meant they could move within the Hall with astonishing freedom, only needing to leave cover to call the fleet. Selby smiled to think that when the Imperials, no doubt monitoring outgoing subspace transmissions, came running to investigate the call, all they'd find were unconscious guards in an empty room. She and Quarle would slip back into hiding to await the fleet's arrival before confronting Ein.

"We're almost there," Quarle said quietly, pausing at an intersection. "Before we go any further, I want to check the situation outside, see what we're up against."

"Sounds good," she murmured back. "Lead on."

He hesitated, then turned to look at her. "I'd rather do it alone," he said. "I know the passage system. You don't. And this way, if I get caught there'll still be one of us left to finish the job."

Selby frowned. It made sense, but she did not particularly want to split up. Quarle didn't have a blaster and would be unable to protect himself if he ran into trouble. She felt another twinge, remembering Vartos. Team members were supposed to watch each other's backs. She briefly considered giving him her own blaster for the reconnoiter, but decided not to. Intelligence had taught her to watch her own back first.

Quarle's eyes dropped to the blaster, too, but when she didn't offer it, he didn't ask. "You wait here," he told her. "I shouldn't be gone too long."

Selby nodded. He looked at her a long moment more, as if wanting to say something else, but then merely nodded, too. Turning, he started around the corner—

"Watch your back," she said softly.

He glanced back, raised that eyebrow. "Always," he assured her, and strode away.

Once he was gone, Selby leaned back against the narrow passage's wall and sighed. Alone with her thoughts for the first time since the shoot-out in the generator room, she could not get Vartos's face out of her mind. Had it simply been incredibly bad luck, his being discovered by the stormtroopers? Or had Claris already been "persuaded" to talk about her fellow operatives?

Which reminded her—

She reached up, slipping off the now-useless earsculpt. Holding it in her palm, she stared at it thoughtfully.

Claris must have talked, she decided. For the eavesdropper to have cut out so quickly and unexpectedly after her arrest, the Imperials must have known exactly what to look for. She fingered the smooth curve of the metal, feeling it gently flex, then brought it up close to study the intricate scrollwork doubling as a tiny speaker.

When Quarle's voice sounded from it, she froze.

With hands that suddenly felt like ice, Selby held the device against her ear. Silence; only her pulse pounding in her head. She frowned, carefully flexed the earsculpt again, and this time whatever weak connection inside the receiver that had apparently caused it to cut out now held. She listened, growing colder with each word.

"—Tafno has promised backup within six hours," Ein was saying. "Two Dreadnaughts at least, maybe more. Convince her to delay making the call until then. When the Rebels arrive, they'll find a fleet with a little firepower of our own waiting for them—not the easy pickings they expect."

"Yes, of course, Your Excellency," Quarle said. "But how do you propose I convince her? We are nearly in position to make the call now. She'll want to know why we should wait."

A long pause. Selby could barely breathe for the tight feeling in her throat. "Tell her that we've imposed satellite silence," the Governor finally said. "Due to this terrorist threat, I've ordered a temporary ban on outgoing subspace comm traffic. Tell her the satellite relays have been shut down—but that a very old,

unofficial relay placed in orbit by your grandfather will be within transmissible range in, oh, about six hours. And that you—*only you*—know how to access it.”

Ein chuckled dryly. “You know, Daven, you may have hated the old man, but you must admit being Corlin Quarle Deld’s grandson has put you in a unique position to realize his visions for Verkuyl.”

“It’s the only thing it ever *has* done for me,” Quarle said. “The rest of the time, I’d as soon forget the tyrant ever existed.”

“I shouldn’t worry about it,” Ein said. “No one holds it against you. You’ve already done more to make Verkuyl the success it is today than your grandfather ever could have. Your service to the Empire will long be remembered.”

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When Quarle rounded the corner, he found Selby waiting for him.

He stopped short at the sight of the blaster she held pointed at his chest. His eyes took in the steadiness of her aim, then brushed past to settle on her face. “Trouble?” he asked.

“How is it,” she began conversationally, “that Corlin Quarle Deld’s grandson ends up on the same side of the Empire that stole his home and destroyed his family’s company?”

Quarle moved a few steps closer. Her aim did not waver. He stopped.

“BactaCo has hardly been destroyed,” he said. “In fact, we currently have more business than we can handle. And the new refinery will increase both production and profits.”

“I see,” Selby said. Although determined to remain as cool about this as he, she felt her eyes narrow. “Then you don’t care what the Empire does to Verkuyl, so long as the company gets its share of the credits.”

He raised that eyebrow, and she had to fight back a sudden, violent urge to wipe that calm look off his face. “Those credits

are what feed and clothe the workers, Selby. That's what a company is all about—providing goods or services for a price. To whom, it doesn't matter. Don't kid yourself that it was any different in my grandfather's day, and don't think your New Republic's motives are any more pure. When it comes to running a company, the accumulation of credits is the bottom line."

"At least your grandfather came by the company honestly," she bit out. "He bought the planet, built the refineries, brought in the workers. He didn't steal it from its rightful owners in the name of the Empire and enslave its workers. He—"

"Don't preach that Rebel propaganda to *me*," Quarle broke in sharply. "He *did* do that—and worse, he did it in the name of free trade. At least when the Empire took over, Verkuyll began giving something back to the workers, not just producing credits to satisfy my grandfather's greed."

He stopped, took a breath to compose himself. "Do you know how he got workers to come to Verkuyll?" he continued, a little more quietly. "Remember, this was before the Empire. People needed jobs, and they were willing to do almost anything to get them. To sell themselves into slavery, even. And so they did."

"In exchange for their passage here and the privilege of working in my grandfather's refineries, they signed on for ten-year terms, at the end of which they were promised a share of stock of the company they'd labored to help build. My grandfather called it indenture," he added bitterly, "but it was slavery."

Selby said nothing. Indentured servitude wasn't like being your own boss, free and clear, but it wasn't slavery, either. Both parties willingly entered into an agreement, and at the end of the contract—

"When the contract expired, most of the workers were so deeply in debt that even with their share of the stock, they couldn't get out," Quarle said. "Once they cashed out and paid off what they owed, there wasn't enough left over to leave. So they stayed."

She frowned. "How'd they get so far in debt?"

"The Company Store, of course," he said. "Most of the workers brought families with them, or married and started families once they arrived. My grandfather provided basic food and housing—soup kitchens and barracks—but anything else cost extra. A lot extra. It added up. By the time the Empire arrived to nationalize BactaCo, ninety out of every one hundred workers were so deep in debt they didn't even get credit vouchers on payday. The wages were simply transferred straight to their delinquent accounts."

He gave Selby a bitter smile. "If the Republic really wanted to *liberate* the workers, it should have been here twenty-five years ago."

Silence followed. "What happened when the Empire took over?" she finally asked.

Quarle's mouth twisted. "Well, I'll say one thing for old Corlin. If he couldn't have the credits, he didn't want anyone else to, either. When he realized the Empire wasn't just going to come in and oversee the operation—that they intended to boot him out and run it themselves—he started erasing company records. Client lists, production reports, shipping contracts—"

"And employee records." She nodded, beginning to understand. "The Empire didn't know about his arrangement with the employees."

"That's right," he said. "So when the Empire took over, Verkuyl stopped being a miserable little company planet run by a tight-fisted tyrant, and became what it was supposed to be: a place for these people to work and live. In the past twenty years, we've tripled our worker population and quadrupled our bacta production—and increased our profits by a thousand percent. Verkuylians are better off under the Empire than they ever were under my grandfather, so don't imagine you're doing us any great favors by *liberating* us."

It was true the Verkuylians had not clamored to be free of the Empire.



Indeed, it had only been in the last two years or so, when the New Republic chased the Empire out of the Core and triumphantly claimed Coruscant, that the resistance movement on Verkuyl had even begun. During her mission briefings, Selby had formed the impression the workers might have been cowed—or *content*, a small voice now whispered—to labor for the Empire forever if not for two things. One, that as Imperial strength ebbed, it provided less and less in the way of support to its smaller possessions such as Verkuyl; and two, the loss of a major medical supplier at Chennis last year had sent New Republic rabble-rousers to various Imperial-held suppliers to see what kind of rebellion they could stir up.

Verkuyl had stirred nicely.

*But that doesn't mean the workers aren't sincere in their desire to be free,* Selby told herself. *Just that it took our encouragement to give them the courage to revolt.*

She looked at Quarle. “If the Empire is forced to leave Verkuyl, you probably stand to inherit the bulk of the holdings. How can you possibly object to that?”

He shook his head. “You just don’t get it, do you? I want what’s best for Verkuyl—not what’s best for myself, but best for the company and the planet. And I believe what’s best for it right now is the Empire.”

“The workers don’t agree.”

“The *workers* don’t see the big picture,” Quarle retorted. “They’re laborers, not administrators. At the moment, they can’t see past the promises the New Republic’s dangling in front of them like nerfs being led to the milking shed.

“Independence—” He made it sound like a dirty word. “You tell me where, anywhere, workers don’t dream of being their own boss. But they haven’t got the faintest idea how to actually do it. Without the Empire’s guidance, they’ll run this company—their livelihood—right into the ground, or make juicy pickings for the bacta cartel. Then how much will their *independence* mean?”

“They’ll be free,” Selby said.

“Free to starve, maybe,” he shot back bitterly.

She raised the blaster.

“Selby, *think* about it,” he said warningly. “The Governor knows what’s going on here. You can’t win, but if you surrender now, I give you my word you won’t be harmed.”

He took a step forward, eyes earnestly searching her face. “Please, Selby. You won’t get out of here any other way. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

In her mind’s eye, Selby saw Vartos held at blaster-point by the Hall stormtrooper. She thought of Claris, and the horror stories every Intelligence agent had heard of the fate that awaited them at the hands of Imperial inquisitors. She thought of Quarle, and that in doing what he truly felt best for his people, he had to betray their confidence, knowing full well that for many of them it meant certain death.

*Black or white, friend or foe*, she reminded herself. In this job, there was no room for anything else.

“Yes, it does,” she said, and fired.

Thirty-four hours later, leaning against the stone railing of the Hall’s roof and staring down at the dancing flames of a celebratory bonfire in the street below her, Selby reflected that, for having salvaged success from such certain failure, she should be in a much brighter frame of mind.

Listening to the revelry going on below, she wondered at the absence of her usual satisfaction at the successful completion of a mission. She didn’t doubt the New Republic had done the right thing, bringing about the liberation of Verkuyl and restoring BactaCo to its native workers. A populace held in thrall, either to an Empire or a business dictator, needed to be set free.

But for the first time in her years of being involved in such liberations, it occurred to her to question whether the New Republic had done it because it was the best thing for the planet

and its people, or because a direct pipeline to BactaCo was the best thing for the New Republic.

She could not forget Quarle's prediction: that the Verkuylians, faced for the first time with self-government and the running of a business, would be crushed under the weight of their new responsibilities. To help ease their transition, Selby had been told the New Republic planned to provide advisors to help the fledgling business-folk find their economic feet in the galactic community. She frowned, bothered by this train of thought. New Republic "advisors" to Verkuyl somehow sounded too similar to the same sort of "advice" the Empire had dispensed.

She half wished Quarle, who had the experience to run the company and, by birth, the right, had chosen to stay and help. But released from the hidden passage where she'd left him bound, only a certain darkness in those green eyes betraying the feelings he kept from showing on his face, Quarle had elected to leave Verkuyl with the rest of the Imperial interlopers. Once the workers learned what he'd done, it was painfully clear that they would never trust him again.

"Sel?" A voice cut into her brooding. "It's almost time to go."

She turned. Vartos's dark skin blended into the shadows around the turbolift, but she could see the faint gleam where his eyes reflected the starlight overhead. Both he and Claris had survived their captivity, although Vartos had required a few hours in a bacta tank to fully recover. Selby found that somehow ironic. "Yes, sir," she replied. "I'll be right down."

Vartos nodded and stepped back into the turbolift, leaving her alone. Selby turned back to the railing, eyes again drawn to the bonfire below. Verkuyl celebrated its freedom tonight—but how long would its jubilation last under the pressures of its new responsibilities?

She sighed. She would not be around to find out. She had done her job—done it well—and now it was time to forget the things Quarle had said and move on to the next assignment.

*Black or white, friend or foe*, she reminded herself. Under the Empire, Verkuyl had been black. Under the New Republic, it would be white. It might be true that Verkuyl's future most likely held shades of gray—but in her line of work, it was best not to look at those shadowed colors too closely.

Turning away, Selby took a deep breath. She grimaced at the stink—the awful smell of the alazhi simmering in the refineries. It permeated everything, and after just four days on Verkuyl, she felt as if its stench had somehow soaked right through her skin and taken up permanent residence in her heart.

She feared it would stay with her forever.

# No Disintegrations, Please

by Paul Danner

*Squeak*

.

*Squeak.*

*Squeak.*

Most beings would have found the intermittent sound annoying. Some might have even gone so far as to blast the noisy repliwood sign into toothpicks. But the main street of the New Hope Settlement was currently devoid of life. There were only a few dust balls moving in accordance to the fickle will of the wind. The row of stores that flanked the main street stood silently, sealed up and forgotten. The rust-colored sands of Ladarra were already returning to reclaim the land it had lost years ago....

And so the sign continued to squeak, hanging as it was by a single frayed duracable. The lettering was a bit faded, but the words were still legible: "The Ellstree Bar—Cold Lum; Droids Welcome; No Disintegrations, Please ...” Like the rest of the shops in downtown New Hope, the bar looked to be long

deserted. But as the old saying goes, “appearance and truth have as much in common as Jawas and Hutts.”

The children sat in a semicircle around the man. There were at least a dozen of them, mostly human, but a few other species were represented as well. They were orphans and urchins, the last generation of a failed colony—too poor to book passage off Ladarra and un-willing or unable to face the difficulties of life in the few larger cities on the planet.

The man had no name as far as the children knew. They merely called him the Storyteller. He was dressed as they were, in ragged clothing scrounged from a dozen wardrobes and cobbled together into a free-form garment. The Storyteller was an older human, with a heavily lined face and a shock of white hair. He had the look of a man who had seen too much and his eyes were unable to stay focused on any one location for longer than a minute—as if they were constantly searching for any possible threat.

“You want *another* story?” he asked in a weary voice.

The children nodded in unison. They rarely spoke, and he wasn’t sure all of them even knew how.

“How about the legend of the fearless young Jedi Knight who rescued a beautiful princess?”

A chorus of groans answered that question.

“Well, then. There’s always the tale of the evil Imperial governor who wanted to conquer the innocent little world of—” He saw the looks on their faces and couldn’t help but laugh. “No? My, but this is a tough crowd.” He shook his head in mock irritation. “So what would you like to hear about?”

“Tell us a new one,” one of the children said. She was a pretty little one, though it was hard to tell under all that grime.

“Come now, you’ve heard all of them at least once. Just pick the one you like.”

The girl folded her arms and jutted out her lower lip.

He fought to keep a straight face. "Okay, okay ..." He scratched his chin in dramatic fashion. "A new story. Let me see... ah, yes, I've got it!"

Their eyes lit up.

"No, no ... that won't work."

The children frowned at him.

"Kidding, kidding," he chuckled for a moment, then quickly grew serious. "I do have one tale that I heard a long time ago. To my knowledge it has never been told again." He had their full attention. "How many of you have heard of ..." His voice lowered to a dangerous whisper. "*Boba Fett?*"

Their eyes grew wide at the mention of the name, and one by one each little hand lifted into the air.

"Well, I happen to know a long-forgotten tale of the greatest bounty hunter who ever lived. Would you like me to share it with you?"

Every head in the room slowly nodded.

The Storyteller had his audience.... He smiled briefly, then settled back into the comfortable chair and slowly closed his eyes. He began the story after a moment of dramatic silence. The children listened with rapt attention.

As the shuttle's exit hatch slowly descended, the sudden hiss of escaping gases nearly caused Rivo to jump right off the platform. As it was, he barely regained enough balance in time to prevent himself from unceremoniously rolling down the ramp.

General Gaege Xarran gave a dramatic sigh to indicate his disgust and extended an arm to steady his brother as he stumbled down the ramp.

Xarran quickly glanced at the sharp line of stormtroopers that served as an honor guard. The squad remained at such rigid attention that he momentarily wondered if the Dark Lord of the Sith had suddenly emerged from the *Lambda*-class shuttle. The Empire's ivory-armored shock troopers weren't always the

brightest specimens around, but at least they knew enough to keep their mouths shut and follow orders.

*Unlike some people*, the General thought as his gaze fell upon Rivo. Xarran suddenly felt his body grow flushed with anger and his lips twitched into an involuntary sneer.

“How could you be so stupid?” he whispered. Not that it really mattered whether the stormtroopers overheard; they had been privy to conversations of much greater importance than the scolding of a sibling.

Rivo might as well have been one of the silent group of guards, for he acted as if his brother had never spoken. His eyes were still darting around wildly, searching for a possible threat in every shadow.

Xarran lightly cuffed his brother with an open hand, striking the back of his head. If there was one thing the General did not like, it was being ignored. “Answer me!”

Rivo’s response was swift—Xarran was doubly shocked as he stared down the stubby barrel of a hold-out blaster. First of all, the General had never imagined his own brother would point a weapon at him, and second Rivo was supposed to have been relieved of his armaments. Someone was destined to die for the oversight, but the General intended to avoid being the unlucky party.

It was his brother’s life, however, that appeared to be in the most immediate danger....

The stormtroopers remained motionless, but somewhere in the span of an eye-blink nine blaster rifles had been expertly trained on Rivo.

The young man didn’t seem to notice. His eyes held a blank stare that didn’t quite focus on anything. The General wasn’t even quite sure if Rivo still recognized him.

“It’s only me, brother,” Xarran said softly. “I’m the one trying to keep you alive.” Slowly but steadily the General reached out with a gloved hand. The span was less than half a meter, but it



took forever to close the distance between his fingers and the weapon.

When the General took hold of the blaster, Rivo's nervous energy drained out as if he were a leaking power cell. His entire body slumped down and the weapon spilled like liquid through his fingers until it was collected in Xarran's waiting hands.

"I'm sorry," Rivo managed through choked sobs. He wavered unsteadily, lost in his anguish.

Xarran pulled him into a hug, nodding to the guards over Rivo's shoulder. The gesture was unnecessary. Their blasters were already holstered.

The General cradled the back of his brother's head, in the same place where moments before Xarran had struck him. That now seemed like an eternity ago—it suddenly became clear to him how time, no matter how brief, could irrevocably affect one's entire existence. Every moment was a crossroad to infinite possibilities—Rivo's greatest talent besides drinking and gambling was picking the wrong path to travel. Fortunately the results, as bad as they were, had never ended with outright disaster. This time was different, however, for Rivo's latest mistake might end up costing his life.

Of course, it went without saying that Xarran would do everything in his power to prevent that occurrence. And as a General in the Imperial Army, that power was considerable.

Xarran gently supported his brother, helping him walk the long landing platform toward the garrison complex. The stormtroopers executed a crisp about-face and fell into line behind them. "You'll have nothing to fear anymore, brother. I doubt anyone could have tracked you here."

Rivo gazed up at his brother and for the first time, there was a glimmer of recognition in his eyes.

Heartened by the small gesture, Xarran continued. "And in the highly unlikely event that you were followed, one would have to be certifiably insane to even consider attacking an entire Imperial garrison."

In the distance, well concealed high in the cover afforded by the dense foliage, a silent figure lurked in the shadows.

He watched, though he held no macrobinoculars—for a pair was conveniently built into his battle-scarred helmet.

He listened as easily if he were one of the stormtroopers, his broadband antenna descrambling the signal of their comlinks and effectively turning the silent soldiers into eavesdropping devices.

Once again, nothing escaped his notice.

Just as no one escaped him.

He climbed down from his perch among the trees with surprising grace considering the bulkiness of his battered gray and green armor.

By the time he finished his descent, darkness had begun to fall like a velvet blanket, and the twin moons of Vryssa were steadily rising in the northern sky.

He paused only once to stare at the towering silhouette of the Imperial garrison base. The massive structure remained in shadow for a few moments longer, then its powerful spot-lumas ignited. The harsh light was coldly reflected in the figure's mask.

General Xarran had unwittingly issued an arrogant challenge.

A challenge Boba Fett was more than ready to accept...

The speeder bike patrol caught him unaware. He had just climbed down from his overlook and was checking his equipment. His motion sensors didn't go off until they were right on top of him. The bikes were so fast they didn't register with enough warning time.

As he dove for cover in the thick tangle of bush, Fett saw one of the scout troopers gesture in his general direction. His two partners immediately circled around, moving into standard Imperial flanking position. Their vehicles were newer models, pure scout bikes by the look of them—very fast, but without any armaments or protection.

Fett needed to know how much they knew. He activated his antenna....

"... Saw something through those trees. Hard to tell, though. Could have just been a bulldobeast."

"Keep your positions. I'll check it out."

"Acknowledged."

"Should we contact the other patrol?"

"You want to listen to their jokes about getting spooked by a little buldo?"

"Negative."

"That's what I thought. Now, stand by."

Fett watched as the lead biker approached, giving his vehicle minimal throttle. The repulsorlift craft drifted a few meters above the ground as the scout trooper conducted a grid search of the area.

Ever so slowly, Fett rolled onto his back and snaked his right arm up through the thicket. He took a single deep breath and then his body froze. The hunter was so still it seemed as if he were made of ferrocrete.

The scout biker moved overhead, directly above Fett's hiding place. The hunter could feel the backwash from the repulsorlift engines pressing against him. The scout was leaning over his vehicle, examining the area closely. The trooper's head jerked back suddenly as if he had spotted something.

Fett flexed his wrist and the rocket-propelled dart housed in his forearm compartment streaked silently through the air. The hunter's aim was perfect. The dart jammed into the soft black bodysuit between the scout's helmet and chestpiece. The poison worked fast, starting with the victim's vocal cords. The man silently jerked forward and then tumbled from his seat, leaving the speeder bike hovering in place.

Moving quickly, Fett hopped up onto the bike and jammed the comlinks of the other two bikers. He opened up the throttle and veered off toward one of them. Without even a glance at the other, the hunter activated his armor's grenade launcher.

The trooper was shocked to see Fett streak past on the speeder bike going after his partner. Figuring he had the drop on the hunter, he gunned his bike forward—just as Fett’s grenade finished its arc and fell into his lap.

The bounty hunter felt the shock wave of the blast but didn’t bother to look back. He was too busy concentrating on his final target. This trooper was taking no chances. The scout was hightailing it out of the vicinity in order to escape the jamming and get some help. He already had a sizable lead on the hunter and was rapidly increasing the gap. Fett knew he couldn’t catch up—the trooper was more familiar with the terrain.

Steering the vehicle with one hand, the bounty hunter drew his modified blaster rifle. Scomp-linked to the macrobinoculars in his helmet, the weapon finally locked on target at three hundred meters. The scout trooper didn’t even see the two angry crimson blaster bolts that slammed into his back and took him clean off his vehicle.

Fett slowed his bike to a stop and scanned the area for anyone else. The hunter was not happy—he had expended unnecessary time and energy. And now they would know for sure he was on the planet.

Perhaps that might be to his advantage....

Rivo’s voice cut the silence, though it was but a whisper. “He’s here. Now.”

“Impossible,” Xarran said, barely keeping the disgust from his voice. The General did not like to see his brother cower. Especially in front of his men. “You give this bounty hunter too much credit, brother. Our sensors would have detected his ship’s approach.”

Rivo shook his head. “This bounty hunter is not the simpleminded scum you are used to dealing with. Boba Fett is different. He has never failed. They say he is the best that ever was....”

Commander Tyrix checked his console. "The patrol *should* have reported in by now, sir."

"This confirms it!" Rivo said.

Xarran would have none of it. "There is no reason to make any connection with your situation and this incident. For all we know—"

"Sir," Tyrix said. "Another patrol has found the remains of the missing unit..." The Commander listened for a moment, pressing his headset against his ear. He paled considerably. "They're all dead."

The General was on his feet. "How?"

"Blaster, a grenade, and some sort of poisoned dart. The troopers' weapons were fully charged ... none of the men even got off a shot."

Rivo let out a nervous giggle. "I told you ... he's coming for me."

Xarran ignored him. "Commander, send out two detachments. If this bounty hunter is indeed here, then I want him found and brought before me. Preferably alive ... although a body will do just fine."

"Two detachments, sir?" Tyrix swiveled his chair around to face the General. "For just one man?"

Xarran's face did not so much as twitch. "I'm sorry, Commander, did you say something?"

"No, sir," Tyrix said, hurriedly swiveling back to his console to activate the comlink.

Fett sat in the hunter's blind among a thick tangle of coilwood branches. He watched as the first wave of speeder bikes roared below him, buzzing along like bloodgnats. He felt the impact tremors as a pair of Imperial walkers lumbered by flanked by a half dozen of their comical AT-ST counterparts. He shook his head in amazement as squad after squad of stormtroopers

marched into the underbrush. Their bright white armor was not exactly the best forest camouflage.

This massive show of force told the bounty hunter all he needed to know about his opponents....

Two detachments meant they certainly knew he was here. And they were nervous.

Behind the tinted faceplate of his battered helmet, Boba Fett actually smiled.

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Xarran leaned over the tactical screen watching proudly as his forces deployed into the forest. He listened to the excited comm chatter as his men moved into position and began an expertly coordinated, utterly systematic search. There would be no escape. Not from the might of the Empire. The General snorted and crossed his arms over his barrel chest. "He's as good as ours."

As he spoke, all communications went dead.

Boba Fett double-checked the comm jamming unit. It was an advanced prototype and very powerful. Unfortunately, its duration was also extremely short: 58 minutes. And then it would explode.

He set his chronometer to countdown mode. Seconds began to vanish. He had just under an hour to eliminate two Imperial detachments.

The hunter turned and hefted his blaster rifle. Fett only foresaw one problem: what to do with the three minutes he would have to spare....

Perched on the edge of his seat in the walker's cockpit, Lieutenant Byrga smacked his lips in nervous anticipation. The AT-AT drivers exchanged a quick glance, but wouldn't dare to

comment on the habit of a superior officer. Even if it was extremely irritating.

Byrga was staring so hard at the sensor readouts that his eyeballs were on the verge of jettisoning themselves free of his head. The Lieutenant didn't like the fact that they had lost communications. Despite all efforts, they could not make contact with the rest of their detachment or the garrison base. That made Byrga anxious. His lips were smacking on overdrive.

"Don't worry," he said trying to reassure the rest of the command crew, who had learned to ignore his rantings and still do their jobs effectively. "We are the best the Empire has to offer. No one escapes us. We will find this fool who dares oppose the will of Palpatine and crush him in the iron grip of the—"

The magnetic grapples connected with the armored underbelly of the AT-AT and locked into place. The twenty-meter lanyard trailing behind it pulled taut and a small armored figure emerged from out of the dense underbrush. Fett calmly waited for the winch in his armored suit to elevate him up to the walker's stomach.

The hunter used the time to power up his wrist lasers.

Byrga's ramblings continued. The one good thing about that, at least for the rest of the command crew, was when his mouth was running there was a cessation of lip-smacking. "Make me proud, men. I want to be the one who finds this bounty hunter."

The Lieutenant abruptly cocked his head to one side. "Did anyone else hear that?"

The drivers shook their heads.

Byrga turned toward the dark tunnel leading back into the walker's passenger compartment. "That's strange. We're not carrying any troops." He activated the blast door and peered inside. After a moment's decision he placed one hand on his

holstered blaster and slowly walked into the AT-AT's neck. "I'll be right back, men. Carry on without me for a moment."

The drivers happily complied.

"I want all communications back on-line!" Frustrated, Xarran screamed into the internal comlink, "Immediately!"

Commander Tyrix sighed and gritted his teeth. "Uh, sir ... the blackout is affecting the comm as well." His voice lowered to almost a whisper. "The engineering teams can't hear you."

The General was at Tyrix's console in three strides. Xarran's face was so close the Commander could count the veins bulging in the man's forehead.

Xarran spoke through gritted teeth, the words slow and precise. "Then get down there and tell them."

"Yes, sir!" Tyrix said as he dove into the nearest turbolift.

The AT-AT drivers were so entranced by the wonderful silence in the cockpit they didn't even notice the unusually long absence of their commanding officer. That was their first mistake. When the blast door finally slid open again they didn't even bother to look up from their consoles. As it turned out, that oversight was their last.

Boba Fett lowered his smoking blaster rifle and took a moment to admire his new mode of transportation.

Lieutenant Grejj sat back in his command chair, fingertips steepled in front of his face. The walker's command crew was doing a fine job considering the circumstances. He only hoped they could get communications back online as quickly as possible. Then they could eliminate the bounty hunter and resume normal duties. Grejj liked his routine. He did not like surprises.

"Sir! We're picking something up on sensors."



The Lieutenant leaned forward. "What is it?"

The driver shook his head. "Just another walker ... must be Lieutenant Byrga."

"Let's go see if his hunting has been more successful."

"He must have already seen us," the driver said. "Here they come now."

Grejj nodded, reaching for the cockpit release lever. "With any luck this will be over soon."

As a matter of fact, it was.

The remains of Lieutenant Grejj's AT-AT and a pair of AT-STs that had stumbled onto the fight were scattered along the ground. The two smaller walkers were so confused by the duel between their larger siblings that they had actually opened fire on Grejj.

Fett guided his AT-AT through the smoking debris as his sensors picked up a large grouping of stormtroopers nearby. The hunter checked his chronometer and noted that he was right on schedule.

"Communications have been restored, sir."

"Finally! Patch me through directly to our forces." Tyrix's fingers flew over his console and he quickly signaled his success with a nod to the General.

Xarran reached for his comlink. "Xarran to Alpha and Delta Groups. All units are to report status immediately."

There was silence.

Rivo gave his brother a meaningful glance, but Xarran ignored him and tried again. "I repeat, this is General Xarran ordering all units to account current status. Alpha Group ... report."

Nothing.

A bead of sweat trickled down the General's forehead. He leaned closer to the mike. "Delta Group ... report."

Again, there was not a sound.

Xarran stared accusingly at Tyrix. "You must have been in error, Commander. The comm system is still down."

"I regret to inform you, sir. It is functioning within normal parameters. Our forces should be responding."

"Yet that is not the case." Xarran's voice had lost a bit of its hard edge. "Why?"

Rivo answered with a plaintive wail. "Because they're all dead!"

Xarran spun around, viciously backhanding his brother across the face. "Will you shut up!"

The unexpected blow sent Rivo crumpling to the deck, where he cringed, holding up his hands in supplication. Xarran's face softened with regret immediately. He helped Rivo up and said in a low whisper, "Forgive me, brother ..."

"Wait a minute!" Tyrix nearly jumped from his console. "General, sensors are picking up one of our walkers at the outer perimeter."

Xarran beamed. "Put it on the viewscreen."

Tyrix complied and the image of a battle-scarred AT-AT filled the viewer.

"Returning in victory?" the Commander said.

"Let's find out." Xarran tried the comlink again. "Base to walker. Report."

A gout of fire suddenly bloomed on the underbelly of the AT-AT followed by a loud explosion that sent a burst of static over the comlink. The walker lurched forward, like a mortally wounded behemoth, then fell. Its chin connected with the ground, and then the rest of its body followed suit, causing the soil to rumble. Then the metal monster disappeared in a haze of smoke and flame.

"What was that?" Tyrix blurted out.

"A message," Rivo said softly.

The base control room was absolutely still. No one dared to move or speak. Everyone was staring silently at the terrible image that loomed on the viewer.

Everyone that is, except for Xarran. The General stood up and slowly walked into his office, boots clacking on the deck plates. His voice echoed through the room. “Someone turn off that blasted thing...”

Tyrix shut off the screen, but as the rest of the base crew hurriedly resumed their duties he continued to stare at the dark viewer for a few moments. His gaze flickered across the room, and came to rest on Rivo. After thirty years of military service, the Commander had seen more than his share of horrible things, but the look of terror in Rivo’s eyes sent a chill rippling down his spine.

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Fett would have liked to have seen the General’s expression when the AT-AT exploded. He probably shouldn’t have wasted the thermal detonator, but the psychological effect on the man and his troops would be worth it.

Both sides had taken their feints and jabs—now it was time to move into the final round. Fett was almost sorry to see it come. The skirmishes before the main event always served as interesting diversions, especially since the outcome of his mission was never in doubt.

Boba Fett did not lose.

“What were you thinking, Rivo?” Xarran was seated in the plush replihide chair behind a desk that dwarfed most landspeeders.

Rivo sat across from him in a much smaller seat. His eyes had apparently found something interesting on the floor. “Money,” he mumbled after a moment. He finally made eye contact with his older brother. “What else is there? I was blinded by greed, Gaege. I never figured that Jabba would be able to track me as the source of his data leak.”

“You didn’t think that someone like Jabba the Hutt would have his own expert slicers? I always told you that your ego would be your undoing, didn’t I? You may be good, but there will always be someone better. And that’s true no matter if you’re a slicer, a soldier, or a bounty hunter.”

“The funny thing is, I didn’t even mean to slice into Jabba’s records. It was a complete accident. But once I found out what I had stumbled onto, I couldn’t resist.”

“You never could pass up a chance to make an easy credit,” Xarran sighed. “Especially if it didn’t involve honest work.”

“I didn’t come here for a lecture, brother. I came here for help.” He stared out the transparisteel window that overlooked the lush forests of Vryssa. “Although from the looks of it, maybe I came to the wrong place.”

The General’s face twitched slightly. “Perhaps you’d have better luck out there by yourself. Feel free to leave anytime.”

“Okay, so I messed up again. I apologize, Gaege.... I know you’re doing your best. I just never thought I’d be on the run from Boba Fett.”

“You stole sensitive information from one of the most dangerous scumlord in the galaxy and then sold it to the highest bidder ... how much did Jabba lose as a result of your actions?”

“Over one-hundred-fifty thousand credits. But I don’t think he really cares about the money. It’s just the principle of the thing. The Hutt wants to make an example of me. And what Jabba wants, Jabba gets.”

“Well, he isn’t going to get you, brother. I don’t care how many bounty hunters he sends.”

“Do you really think Fett can be stopped?”

“The man is good. Very good. But I see his strategy now, and I refuse to play his game any longer. No more troops will leave the base. If he wants you, he will have to come here. And mark my words, no one can penetrate the ‘death fence.’ It’s set for maximum voltage per my orders. The charge is so high the tiniest

spark could fry a bantha in seconds.” Xarran gave a thin-lipped smile. “No one gets out. And no one gets in.”

Night had fallen on Vryssa.

Fett was crouched in the bushes, twenty meters away from the base’s outer perimeter. The ten-meter-high wall surrounding the complex seemed to be alive, crackling as it was with azure arcs of electricity. The surges danced over the surface like writhing snakes.

The spot he had picked was a good distance away from the nearest gatehouse, though stormtroopers constantly patrolled along the fortified catwalks set back from the fence. Observation towers were spaced about one hundred meters apart along the catwalk, and a combination of flood lights, detection sensors, and droids were used to maintain security. Fett’s current position put him roughly fifty meters from the two flanking towers. It was a good distance, but he didn’t think it would be enough to avoid detection.

Fett activated his internal comlink. It was time for a little distraction....

*Slave I* roared over the treeline, screaming toward the garrison base at full speed. Its sophisticated sensor-jamming array was fully powered and the hull itself was magnetically polarized to scramble and confuse enemy scans. As it was, the base was taken by surprise.

On its first pass the ship delivered a frighteningly potent volley of concussion missiles, proton torpedoes, blaster bolts, and ion blasts. The attack was so fierce that the base’s powerful deflector shields fluctuated and the entire structure shuddered with the impact.

“See?” Xarran shouted from the command center. “The man has grown desperate! He knows there’s no way in so he resorts to a suicide run.” He focused his gaze on Rivo. “*Everyone* makes mistakes, sooner or later. And I will make sure this one is his last.”

Standing at one of the tactical stations, Tyrix turned to his commanding officer. “All turbolaser turrets are primed and ready, sir.”

Xarran squeezed his gloved hand into a tight fist. “Fire at will! Blow him out of the sky!”

As *Slave I* circled for another pass, six heavy twin laser turrets mounted around the building opened fire, followed by the thunderous roar of the three heavy twin turbolaser turrets from the upper level of the base. Unfortunately, the heavy weapons were slow to fire and even slower to track such a swift target.

Fett’s ship executed an amazing series of maneuvers that allowed it to continue its strafing run while dancing around the green swarm of angry laser bolts. Twisting, turning, and rolling, *Slave I* delivered a vicious counter-attack capped by a full spread of proton torpedoes that punched a gaping hole in the base’s deflectors. In return, Fett’s ship took some minor damage, but easily eluded any critical hits.

*Slave I* executed a quick Segnor’s Loop and moved into position for another assault.

“It’s not working,” Tyrix said, slamming a hand onto his console. “That ship’s just too fast for our turrets to track. We’re barely touching him and he’s already knocked three quarters of our shield generators off-line.” The damage control screen flashed the grim news. “Another run like that and he’ll leave us defenseless!”

“No one is that good,” Xarran thundered. The General was shaking with rage. “Launch the entire squadron. I want every TIE we have in the air now.”

Nodding, Tyrix punched the comm panel, calling for all pilots to report to their spacecraft. He turned to Xarran, “Should we sound the code alarm, sir?”

“No,” Xarran said, his face flushing slightly. “I’ve served in the Imperial Army for most of my life and I will not be taunted into sounding full alert by one man, no matter how powerful he may appear to be. Besides, Fett will not breach the perimeter ... the TIEs will see to that.”

Tyrix paused a moment before responding—a sign of disapproval he would never dare to vocalize. “As you wish, sir.”

Rivo shook his head. “Why won’t you take the precautions? It won’t hurt to—”

Xarran cut him off. “There isn’t much good you can do up here, brother. Perhaps you should return to your quarters.”

“But, I’m ... fine.” Rivo saw the look on Xarran’s face and silently walked to the turbolift.

*Slave I* soared through the skies, taking potshots at the forty TIE fighters giving chase. Fett hated to see such an unfair fight, but there was nothing he could do about it. His ship was faster, more maneuverable, and bristled with twice as much weaponry as all the fighters put together. And unlike the TIEs, *Slave I* had shields. The Imperial fighters were hopelessly outmatched, even with the rather simplistic combat routines he had preprogrammed into the ship. The attacks on the garrison were typical Rebel strafing runs the Empire had so much trouble dealing with, while the evasive maneuvers against the TIEs were randomized according to sensor information. Fett avoided having *Slave I* be too aggressive with the fighters. Preprogramming was still no match for a live pilot.

All things considered, it was a good distraction, but would be over relatively soon. He was going to have to hurry.

Most of the stormtrooper patrols had cleared the catwalks—those that remained had their attention focused on the skies above.

Fett sprinted for the perimeter fence. When he closed half the distance he engaged his jet pack and soared into the air in a burst of flame. Elevating quickly, the hunter easily cleared the ten-meter-high fence, continued over the energy mine field between the fence and the base, and executed a perfect landing on the catwalk.

He checked his blaster rifle and quickly moved to the observation platform to his left. The first stormtrooper to step out caught a bolt in the helmet and went down. In midstride Fett sent a stun grenade arcing through the air and into the guardhouse. His faceplate tinted opaque as the flash-bang erupted, so the hunter didn't miss a beat when he dove inside the blast door on his stomach. Wild blaster bolts erupted overhead as Fett calmly picked off all five stormtroopers manning the tower.

He sealed the entrance behind him and walked over to the computer terminal. Fett entered the encryption codes he had purchased from an unsavory Bothan and went to work. The first thing he pulled up was a three-dimensional schematic of the garrison.

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“Status?”

Tyrix glanced at the General and almost smiled. “We took heavy losses but the TIEs are routing him. Take a look.”

The Commander stepped away from the tactical screen. Xarran studied the images for a few moments, watching as *Slave I* slowly led the TIE fighters away from the base. “It's a feint.”

“What?”

“Fett's not on that ship.”

Tyrix was confused. “Then where is he?”



“Here.” It pained the General to say it. “Inside the perimeter by now, I’d venture. Sound the code alarm—reference an intruder alert. Go to full battle stations and step up interior patrols.” Xarran quietly walked back to his chair and dropped down as if the weight of an AT-AT was set upon his shoulders.

Fett stood at the command console of Sub-Level 3. Over a dozen stunned or dead technicians were scattered around the room. The hunter studied the illuminated panels which controlled the base’s main power, backup generators, tractor beams, and deflector shield generators. He went to work....

Tyrix nearly fell out of his chair. “Sir! We have him!”

“What?” The General was by his side in seconds.

“Someone’s accessing the main control units on Sub-Level Three.” He called up the data. “See? He’s using a code from last month, and the computer flagged it.”

“It has to be Fett. He’s trying to shut us down.” Xarran contemplated his response. “Send three squads down to ... no, wait. Seal off that room immediately. We’ll flood it with Chemtrox gas and that will be the last of our little bounty hunter.”

Tyrix’s voice lowered. “But what if it’s not him ...? And even if it is, he could have some technicians—”

Xarran pushed the Commander out of the way. His fingers flew over the console and a smile slowly dawned on his face. Fett was shutting down all systems and there was no time for moral debate. The race was on again and this time Xarran would win.

Fett whirled around as the heavy blast doors sealed and locked. He was effectively trapped. So, they finally discovered his trick and now knew where he was. It certainly took them long enough. Of course it was too late. Fett was about to cut the power.

He was so absorbed in his work that he almost missed it ... luckily, his sound sensors picked up the recessed vents clicking open and the slow, steady hiss of gas being pumped into the room.

A quick scan revealed the substance to be Chemtrox—an extremely lethal agent. Fett had heard it delivered a particularly painful death. He didn't intend to find out firsthand if the rumors were true.

Fett activated his armor's enviro filter seal. It protected him from harmful or deadly atmosphere and there was a two-hour supply of air.

As the Chemtrox gas swirled around him Fett prepared to shut down the main computer.

"There ..." Xarran wiped the sweat from his forehead and sat back in Tyrix's chair. "It's over. No one could have possibly survived that."

Everything went black. Every last bit of power in the entire garrison base. There was only darkness.

The Commander's voice rang out. "You were saying, sir?"

A blaster shot sent a crimson flash of light through the control room and Tyrix's body hit the floor. General Xarran activated a glowrod and hefted his blaster pistol. His eyes danced wildly in the soft light, then focused on the corpse of his Commander.

The terrified faces of the base command crew stared back at him as if he had suddenly transformed into a mynock. Xarran fired three bolts into the ceiling. "Everyone out. Now!"

The crew quickly obeyed, stumbling over themselves to reach the emergency stairs. The General entered his office and sat down in front of his console. There was one system that would not have been affected by the loss of main or backup power. It ran off a special generator that only he knew about—well, he and Tyrix, but the Commander wouldn't be talking any time soon.

Xarran activated the panel and smiled as the base's self-destruct system lit up with crimson letters. The General lowered his head to accommodate the retinal scanner and began reciting the code to activate the countdown.

Fett moved through the darkened, deserted corridors of the base. Except for the steadfast stormtroopers, nearly everyone had fled the once-mighty garrison. With his sound, motion, infrared, and targeting sensors all activated, picking off the ivory-armored opponents was ridiculously easy.

Of course, the one person who mattered was also present ... somewhere in the bowels of the garrison.

Fett had paid a small fortune to have the unwitting fool tagged with one of his special microscopic subdermal trackers back on Inat Prime. It was a wise investment.

Jabba had not placed an open bounty on Rivo Xarran; rather, His Bloatedness had offered the job solely to Fett ... fifty thousand credits. Dead or alive.

Fett suspected the Hutt wanted to see just how good Fett really was. Jabba knew Rivo would run to his big brother for help and an entire Imperial garrison would stand between the hunter and his prey.

Fett didn't like the Hutt, but he paid well and on time. That was more than he could say for most. Besides, one day Jabba would get what was coming to him. After all, justice was a patient hunter.

Fett knew the value of that particular virtue very well, so he continued his careful ascent through the garrison's main tower. There was no need to rush. The end would come soon enough. And no matter how novel the hunt had been, the conclusion was always the same.

With a high-pitched giggle, General Gaege Xarran, executive officer of the Imperial Garrison Base on Vryssa, moved down

the stairwell. He had holstered his blaster in favor of a larger carbine. A spot-luma was mounted on top of the weapon, and a stubby microgrenade launcher barrel hung underneath. “Come out, come out wherever you are ...”

Fett emerged from the stairwell on Level 5. His tracker unit informed him that Rivo was less than fifty meters away, in the barracks adjoining the base’s recreation facilities. The hunter moved down the shadowed corridor, stopping at the last door. Fett imagined the slicer was hiding under the bed, probably clutching his hold-out blaster and promising that if he survived this situation he’d never do anything bad again.

Fett slapped a small explosive charge to the entrance and stepped back. He activated the detonator and watched as the door evaporated into a fine mist. The hunter paused for a moment, half expecting Rivo to fire a few desperate shots out the doorway.

Holding his rifle at the ready, Fett carefully made his approach. When his motion sensor alarm activated, the hunter froze and took aim, figuring Rivo was making a run through the door.

Fett was so intent on the situation, it took him a split second longer than usual to realize that the motion alarm had not come from in front of him. He whirled around, though even as he did, he knew it was too late. He braced for the impact.

The heavy blaster bolt took the hunter in his left side with such force that it knocked him off his feet. He landed hard—hard enough to knock the wind out of any ordinary man. But Fett was no ordinary man.

He was firing his rifle from the moment he recovered from the impact. The furious volley sent his attacker scurrying back around the hallway for cover. Daggers of pain began jabbing at his side, but the wound was not serious and would have to be ignored for the moment Fett had more important things to worry about.

His attacker suddenly swung back around and began shooting. As Fett returned fire, he recognized Gaege Xarran's features. The exchange exacted a toll on both men ... Xarran took a bolt in the left leg, sending him stumbling back behind cover; Fett was grazed in the right arm and his feeling in the limb abruptly tingled into numbness. The rifle tumbled from Fett's grasp and he had to make a choice. Quickly.

The hunter threw himself into the room just as a blaster bolt singed the floor where he had been microseconds before. Fett rolled into the large office and came up with his remaining wrist laser ready to go; however, his tracker unit told him that Rivo must be in the refresher. That door was closed, so Fett kept most of his attention focused on the room's entrance. He was suddenly sorry he had vaporized the front door.

Fett crawled over to the wall, pushing his back against it. His right arm still dangled uselessly at his side. Luckily his left arm was uninjured, allowing him to keep the wrist laser aimed at the doorway.

The bounty hunter didn't have time to admonish himself for carelessness. Time was too precious now. Rapid yet rational decisions would mean the difference between life and death, success and failure. He could feel his heart surging in his chest. The outcome was in doubt for the first time. Oddly enough, he rather enjoyed it.

Fett began with a quick appraisal of his situation. Rivo would have to be mostly ignored at the moment. Even if he did come out shooting, the man was not combat-trained. Gaege Xarran was trained, however ... Fett had learned the General had once served as a member of the Imperial Royal Guard. And while the General might have been past his prime, he was still very well-armed.

On the other hand, Fett's armor had lost many of its secondary systems. While the basic suit was functioning, his sensor arrays were off-line and he could not direct any power to most of the weapons. The communication units were

undamaged, but relatively useless at the moment. The only intact item that could prove helpful was his jet pack.

Things were not looking good....

Without his sensors, he had no way of knowing if or when the General would come around the door frame firing. Even worse, Fett could not defend himself, other than in hand-to-hand combat. And at the moment he was short one hand.

Fett reached into one of his pouches and withdrew his final thermal detonator. He would not allow himself to be captured. He would take his enemies with him.

Then he saw it....

Xarran's blaster had been equipped with a spot-luma. In his frenzied state, the General must not have realized that it also gave away his otherwise stealthy approach.

By watching the halo of light increase in intensity, Fett could estimate exactly how far away Xarran was at the moment. Fett quickly performed another analysis of the room and formulated a new plan. The bounty hunter barely resisted the urge to grin as he quickly set the delay on the thermal detonator.

He glanced up once more at the ever-brightening light outside the door and lowered his left hand, gently rolling the silver sphere toward the doorway.

A moment later, General Gaege Xarran whirled around the corner expertly scanning the room with his blaster. "It's over!" he screamed triumphantly, just as something clicked against his boot.

Xarran looked down at the thermal detonator in horror.

"Yes," Fett said. "It is...." And a microsecond-long burst from his jet pack sent the hunter streaking across the room.

Before Xarran could even think about reacting, Fett was at the far end of the office and safely hidden behind a large desk.

The explosion that followed rocked the entire floor.

Fett's chosen cover was of typical Imperial design—big, bulky, and quite resilient. Just as he had hoped, the durasteel

monstrosity absorbed most of the impact while his armor deflected any burning debris.

He brushed himself off and approached the refresher door. Rearing back, he kicked it open and prepared to beat Rivo into unconsciousness one-handed if need be. As it turned out he didn't have to....

Where Rivo should have been Fett saw only a small holopad. There was a possibility the device was rigged, but the hunter didn't think that was the case. He swiveled the viewscreen forward and was greeted by the smiling holographic visage of Rivo Xarran.

"Hello, Fett. I'd ask you how you're doing, but the answer is sort of obvious. An encounter with my brother, perhaps?" Rivo paused. "Well, are you going to say something or just stand there?"

Fett was a bit surprised with the live feed ... he had mistakenly assumed it was a recorded message: "What do you want?"

"Oh, yes. I forgot. You are a man of few words, aren't you? Well, as I'm sure you've figured out by now, I discovered your wonderful little tracker. I bet you'd love to know how. Sorry, I can't give away all my secrets.... I must say I am impressed. I never thought you'd actually foil an entire Imperial garrison," Rivo said with a sneer, "even if it was commanded by my idiot brother. Of course, there's no sense in taking any chances, either. Which is why I safely removed myself from your reach."

"For the moment," Fett said, studying Rivo's image. "You are not quite the sniveling coward you appear to be."

"No, I'm not. But neither am I a truly evil individual. My only weapons are my computer and my mouth. Unfortunately, they are both boon and bane at times." He waved a hand. "But enough about me. Let's get down to business. I cannot get back to my normal life with you chasing me around the galaxy, and I know you will not rest until you drag me or my corpse before the great Bloated One. Correct?"

Fett didn't reply.

“So, I propose a compromise ... and to show my good faith, I’ll even let you in on a little secret. My brother has set the garrison base’s self-destruct system. Relax, you have ten minutes before it blows; however, I’ll make this quick. You can tell Jabba that I died in the explosion, collect your fee, and go about your business. I will assume a false identity, go underground, and never, ever reveal what has transpired within this building so long as I live. We both win.” Rivo’s confident gaze faltered somewhat. “What do you say, bounty hunter? Is it a deal?”

After a moment, the bounty hunter nodded. “Very well. But one day I will find you, Rivo. And on that day, I will finish this job.”

Rivo grinned. “Ah, yes. It may take longer than usual, but Boba Fett always wins. Very good, then. Until that day ...” His image flickered away into darkness.

The hunter checked his chronometer. At least that was still working. He had better get moving. Fett had a feeling the little Sithspawn might have “accidentally” overestimated the countdown to detonation. As he headed for the roof, Fett sent out a beckon call to *Slave I*...

The Storyteller stopped, enjoying the eager stares of the children.

“How does it end?” asked the little girl breathlessly.

Her question was taken up by the other kids as they demanded a resolution to the tale.

The Storyteller smiled appreciatively and continued. “Well, after many, many years Boba Fett managed to track Rivo down to a backwater planet in the Outer Rim Territories, to the very cantina where the slicer was hiding—” He paused for effect and then said softly, “—And then the greatest bounty hunter of all time finally completed his task. You see, Boba Fett *never* loses.” He glanced at his chronometer. “Now, it’s way past your bedtimes. Get off to sleep, all of you. And no bad dreams or no more stories before bedtime.”



Satisfied, the children filed up the stairs to their rooms, still chattering about the story. All except for the little girl. She paused at the top of the steps with a quizzical look on her face. "Is Boba Fett a good guy or a bad guy?"

He considered that for a moment. "That's a question only you can answer," he said finally.

The girl shrugged her shoulders and bounded up the stairs, leaving the Storyteller alone with his thoughts.

Well, not quite alone.

"How long have you been sitting there?" the Storyteller asked.

"You tell me," came the flat, filtered response.

The Storyteller turned toward the shadowed booth from which a gray and green-garbed figure emerged. Boba Fett stood before the Storyteller, arms folded across his armored chest.

"After all these years you actually managed to find me." Smiling, the Storyteller stood up. "At least my little tale will be authentic now."

The bounty hunter slowly reached into one of his pouches and the Storyteller took a deep breath. Fett withdrew something silver and shiny and the Storyteller suddenly had visions of thermal detonators.

Fett casually tossed the object toward the man, who caught it out of reflex.

The Storyteller braced himself for the end, but when it didn't come he looked at the object in his palm. It was a credit chit.

Fett was already walking toward the exit.

The Storyteller held it up, confused. "What is this?"

The bounty hunter didn't turn around. "Many things, Rivo. An end, a new beginning ... and maybe even an answer to a little girl's question." Fett glanced back once, then disappeared through the doors.

The Storyteller (he no longer really thought of himself as Rivo) examined the chit. It contained fifty thousand credits. The exact bounty put on his head by Jabba. Suddenly, everything became clear. He grinned and ran outside.

Boba Fett was gone ... vanished into the wastes of Ladarra.

The Storyteller stood there in silence. And realized something was wrong. For a brief moment, he couldn't quite figure it out—then it suddenly hit him.

There was no squeaking.

The Storyteller looked down ... and found himself staring at the disintegrated remains of the bar's repliwood sign. He threw back his head and began laughing.

# Day of The Sepulchral Night

by Jean Rabe

Wonder what we'll find?" Solum'ke mused for what I guessed was the half-dozen<sup>th</sup> time since we set out.

"Maybe nothing," I replied—again. "It's just a legend, after all. Don't get your hopes up."

"Well, Diergu-Rea Duhnes'rd, love of my life, I think there's something to it," she persisted. She formed her bulbous, mottled lips into a delightful pout. "The Qwohog thinks so, too. Otherwise, he wouldn't have talked us into renting this sail barge."

*Talked you, I mentally corrected her. Talked you into spending the last of my credits during the Day of the Sepulchral Night.*

If we'd stayed in the city—and on dry ground—we could have booked passage on that Corellian corvette occupying most of the port and got back into Imperial lanes. There we could pick up a few leads on lucrative contracts. I'd spent so many credits on our brief vacation on this backwater world that I needed to turn a good bounty to replenish my normally bulging account.

We'd come to Zelos II several days ago for a little relaxation. The place is known for its tourist spots—elaborate spas and cantinas that cater to all manner of beings and all manner of tastes and appetites. For the past several days I'd been lavishly doling out my credits on the exhibitions and in the casinos, and—of course—on the more-than-suitable accommodations in which I had been romancing the lovely Solum'ke. Like me, she's a Weequay, a tough-looking humanoid with alluring coarse, gnarled skin. Hers is an enchanting desert tan, shaded darker in just the right places and relatively smooth across her beautiful bald head. Mine is a dark gray, nearly the color of the magnificent wiry topknot that extends to the center of my back. We make an attractive couple.

We don't *have* to use words between us—not spoken ones, anyway. Ours is the ability to excrete pheromones that allow us to communicate our moods and desires. Right now my desire was to be elsewhere, but I kept my pheromones in check so as not to give it away and disappoint her.

“Look at the moons,” she breathed huskily. Her pheromones said she was in a very romantic mood. “They're beautiful.”

We don't *have* to use words. But I like the sound of her voice, and she knows it. I followed her gaze. Zelos II has four moons, and I had read somewhere that moonlight is an essential ingredient to an amorous environment. That's one of the reasons I suggested we come to this planet.

Unfortunately, it was also because of those four moons that we were now on an understaffed sail barge skimming a meter above the Great Zelosi Sea and leaving land uncomfortably far behind.

K'zk, the Qwohog piloting the rented barge, had been sitting at a nearby table in the restaurant we had selected for dinner last night. He had looked small and out of place among his humanlike Zelosian companions—whom he was failing to convince to make this very trip. In fact, he pretty much looked out of place away from water. That drew Solum'ke's attention,

and she immediately became more interested in K'zk's diatribe than in my soft-spoken words of adoration and the grilled lemcock haunch sizzling on her plate.

Qwohogs are bipedal amphibians. This one was pale green, almost matching the restaurant's drapes. He had silvery-blue scales atop his head, pointed ears, and long, thin fingers that he waved every time he uttered a word. His speech was funny and clipped, made harsh and nasally by the vocalizer mask he wore. I'd learned that Qwohogs normally communicate by sending vibrations through the water—freshwater—and need a mask to be understood above the waves. Saltwater isn't their preferred environment, but apparently this Qwohog and his fellows had swallowed their fears and were about to strike off across the Great Zelosi Sea. They just needed someone along who wasn't averse to maybe getting in the saltwater.

"Isn't this romantic?" Solum'ke whispered, interrupting my musings. She demurely leaned against the rail and stared at three of Zelos II's moons. They hung low in the sky, practically touching the sea. "The moons, the water, the breeze across my skin. Truly romantic."

"Not if you're a Zelosian," I said as I moved closer and placed my hand on the small of her back. "Right now it's midmorning, and under any other circumstance you couldn't see those moons. The fourth moon's aligned with the sun. The natives are superstitious enough as it is about the moons and night and day. But on this particular day their behavior is extreme—or so I can tell from the datachips I've skimmed. No wonder K'zk couldn't get any of the natives to come with him. Suicides, insanity, unfounded hysteria. In fact ..."

"All right," she said flatly, the whimsy suddenly gone from her voice. "It's an eclipse. Nothing romantic about an eclipse, huh? At least not to you. Hysteria. Such a romantic word."

"The Day of the Sepulchral Night," I said, thinking I should say something to get the mood back. I shouldn't have gotten

analytical on her. “Not romantic in and of itself, certainly. But everything’s romantic—and perfect—when you’re with me.”

She grinned, revealing a pearly row of wide, blunt teeth, and settled against me. “I’m so glad we came to this place.”

I kept my pheromones in control, smiled, and thought about my credits, which were continuing to evaporate on sail barge rent with each kilometer of sea we crossed. “Nowhere else could we have seen this day of night,” I answered as I held her close.

The Zelosians’ culture is wrapped around day and night—we both learned that our first day on the planet. Light is good, darkness is bad, according to their philosophy. And during this extremely rare eclipse, the natives lock themselves indoors in abject terror. The cantinas and casinos close, the spas are boarded up, and only non-Zelosian ships in the port come and go. Even I had to admit the morning sky looked a little eerie.

The reflection of the three full moons, a sallow blue, a pallid violet, and a glimmering green a shade darker than K’zk the Qwohog, hit the small waves, sending patterns of light dancing toward the prow and the horizon.

I squinted at a spot far in front of us. Something was breaking up the light show.

“Wreck off starboard!” one of the four Qwohog crewmen called. It was a scant crew, the Zelosians who worked the barge taking the day off to hide. My rent had paid for the craft only—K’zk provided the crew.

“There, K’zk!” a stocky Qwohog shouted. “That wave-skimmer’s busted good. Must’ve run aground on the rocks!” The Qwohog gestured wildly toward jagged shards of hull that floated on the dark water, scattered amid bits of torn sail and rigging.

A coral spike jutted defiantly out of the center of the refuse. The ruined wave-skimmer’s masthead, a remarkably buxom Zelosian woman, was caught against the spike and thumped hollowly like a beating heart with each lapping wave. There were bodies, most bobbing facedown, the life long since seeped out of them. A few men were draped over the larger pieces of hull and

might still be alive. It was impossible to tell from this distance, and the matter was becoming moot. I spied a tiny dome-shaped pate cut through the water—melk. The scaly rodent-sized beast rose, rolled its eyes back and opened its mouth. In an instant it had begun to feast on one of the possible survivors. Other melk were appearing, about two dozen I guessed. I imagined the waves, painted black by the eclipse, were becoming tinted red with blood.

K'zk padded toward us and peered toward the coral spike and slowly shook his head. "Too many shoals around here. Tide's too low. Any skimmer captain worth his water would have known better, wouldn't have taken a skimmer into these parts." He ran his slender fingers across his scales. "Lower the sails!" he called through his mask. "Hold our position! I don't want us drifting any closer." Softer, he said to the closest Qwohog, "Take a sail raft over. See if there might be any survivors. I'll not risk this barge going into those shallows for any man. Diergu-Rea, do you mind going with him? Little short-handed because of the eclipse, you know."

I scowled. I didn't like the water, but I knew how to swim, so I wasn't afraid of hopping in a little sail raft. But I didn't want our captain to spend the rest of the day picking through bloating bodies. With so many melk feasting, the odds of finding someone alive were about as great as finding a veelgeg in a kemlish pulled from Kryndyn's deep bay. Nil, in other words. I wasn't worried about the melk looking to me for dinner. With so much flesh in the water, they'd leave the sail raft alone. What worried me was the waste of time.

We were here to find Zelosian's Chine—or not find it, more likely—and return to the relative safety of the Kryndyn spaceport. I thought about voicing my objection, since I was financing this little trip, but one of the Qwohogs cut me off.

"Found a couple of live ones, K'zk!" An alert Qwohog had a pair of macrobinoculars pressed to his eyes and trained on the water. He was gesturing with a spindly arm.

I let out a deep breath and headed toward the sail raft. “Yeah, I’ll go.”

“Me, too,” Solum’ke added excitedly. Her pheromones told me she was honestly anxious to help.

We climbed into the raft, reached for the syntherope dispenser to lower it a bit, then we kicked on the repulsorlift switch. The tiny craft settled about a half a meter above the water. I glanced back at K’zk, who was checking over the barge’s repulsorlift unit.

Our Qwohog mate guided the sail raft among the refuse. From the looks of the broken deck plates and the floating, bent mast, I guessed the wave-skimmer had been a little less than half the size of the sail barge. Its lift mechanism probably wasn’t powerful enough to float it high above the spires, and hence the skimmer had struck one and become crippled.

The smell of the bodies wasn’t strong yet, suggesting the men probably died around dawn. Still, it was enough to make Solum’ke wrinkle her pretty nostrils. She pointed toward the two men the Qwohog had miraculously spotted. Humans, not Zelosians like most of the unfortunates facedown in the water. They were clinging desperately to a couple of cargo crates lashed to another coral spike. It kept them out of the water and away from melk, but it was a precarious perch. The men waved frantically and called to us. The sail raft scraped against a ridge edging just above the surface as we made our way toward them. I glanced over the side, the moonlight revealing a shallow reef. I could’ve stretched my arm over the side and touched it if I weren’t afraid a melk would bite my hand off. If we’d taken the sail barge in to rescue these men, we might’ve run aground, too, and been melk food.

As we pulled alongside the crates, I helped the survivors into the sail raft. They were pale men with dark brown hair that was matted with blood. Their features hinted that they were Corellian—far from our home, but not at all that far from the Corellian corvette that was in port. If they were from that ship,



they might be our free ride out of here—transportation in exchange for our saving their lives.

The older one looked to be in worse shape. His lip was split, and a deep gash along his leg was swelling, probably becoming infected. It looked like a melk had bit him and spit him back out. A primitive gaffhook at his side was crusted with blood and made me wonder if he had managed to take a piece out of the reptile.

“Thank the moons someone saw us,” the younger man said. “We’d have been dead by evening if you hadn’t come along.”

“Anyone else alive?” Solum’ke asked.

The pair shook their heads and found a spot in the center of the sail raft, settling heavily onto the seat. “They’re sleeping in the bellies of the melk,” the eldest said. He extended his hand to me, and I shook it. It was terribly cold. He’d been in the water a while. He introduced himself as Hanugar, and the younger survivor as Sevik.

“What happened?” I found myself asking.

“A coral reef and a low tide because of the eclipse,” Hanugar said. “The wave-skimmer we rented struck it late last night. Cracked the hull open and ruined the repulsoflight mechanism. It was a good ship, but the captain was nervous, wanting to get home before the Day of the Sepulchral Night. When we hit, we took on water too fast to do anything to save her.”

“What were you doing so far from the coast?” Solum’ke wondered aloud.

Sevik shrugged. “Sightseeing. The regular tourist stuff.”

The Qwohog steered the sail raft back to the barge, while we listened to Hanugar and Sevik explain how they were barely able to tie the cargo containers together and hang onto a coral spike to escape being melk bait. They seemed genuinely thankful for the rescue, and volunteered to pay for our passage offworld. My hunch was right. They were from the big corvette in port.

Once on deck, Solum’ke looked over the Corellians’ wounds. She has a knack for fashioning poultices and bandages—Sriluur

knows she's had to bandage me plenty of times after I ended up on the wrong end of a cantina fight.

"What brought you out here so late at night?" Sevik asked us. It was a fair question—we'd asked it of him.

"Sightseeing. The regular tourist stuff," Solum'ke replied.

"Honeymooning," I whispered in answer so softly that he couldn't hear. I grinned and turned away, knowing Solum'ke wouldn't tell the Corellians the real reason we were out here—hunting for treasure that according to K'zk was buried in Zelosian's Chine.

From somewhere behind me, I heard K'zk order one of his fellows to bring the Corellians some food. As the pair devoured the meal, I listened to their idle banter. K'zk was telling them we were heading south, thinking about skimming toward the Bryndas Islands where the more exotic spas could be found. The Qwohog sounded convincing. Ha! I thought to myself. *He had tried to convince the Zelosians at the restaurant to come out on this fool treasure hunt with him. But they'd have nothing to do with it because of the eclipse. Then he turned his charms on Solum'ke and succeeded. Treasure appealed to her.*

I heard the flap of the sails rising and billowing above me, the rev of the repulsorlift engine. Time to be on our way again.

K'zk had told us he couldn't go after the treasure himself. It was the problem with saltwater. He couldn't breathe it, and being submerged in it could make his skin blister. Going after the treasure might entail getting wet—and hence his need for someone to help him. He said we'd split whatever we found fifty-fifty.

I felt the barge veer to the right to avoid another dangerous coral ridge.

K'zk claimed that according to Zelosian legend, during the Day of the Sepulchral Night the tides would be at their lowest point. Several miles offshore of the main continent, the crest of the sunken mountain ridge called Zelosian's Chine would poke above the waves. Supposedly great wealth rested within a cave

inside the crest—treasure that once belonged to a merchant prince. According to the legend, nearly two hundred years ago during another rare eclipse, the prince's ship was caught in Zelos's gravity well and pulled into the atmosphere and crashed into the chine. The prince survived and directed his men to bury his treasure in a cave along the ridge. He intended to make a raft of part of his ruined ship, sail into a port, and purchase a ship that would take him back to his treasure and then offworld.

But according to the legend, he drowned before he got to shore. The melk probably ate him. And in the decades in between and since, no one had recovered the prince's treasure. Not the Zelosians, because they wouldn't go out during the Day of the Sepulchral Night. And not the tourists, because the legend was supposedly a closely guarded secret. K'zk wouldn't say how he came by the tale.

"The chine, K'zk! I see Zelosian's Chine!" one of the Qwohogs roared through his vocalizer mask.

I skeptically peered over the rail. Nothing but choppy water. I couldn't see what the Qwohog was so excited about.

"K'zk?" I heard a Qwohog prompt. "We goin' in?"

I felt the sail barge ease forward, then I looked past the bowsprit. There, a couple hundred yards out, something edged above the waves. At first glance I thought it was the spiny backbone of some great sea creature. I felt my hand drift to my blaster. But the backbone didn't move, and I relaxed a little. It was nothing more than another coral ridge.

Solum'ke was at my side. She had left Sevik and Hanugar and had silently snuck up behind me. "This has to be it," she breathed. "This has to be Zelosian's Chine."

"You don't know that," I gently warned. "There's lots of coral ridges around here and ..."

Her dark eyes sparkled and her wide mouth fell open as we neared the ridge. The moons illuminated the peaks that jutted above the surface about a dozen feet or so. There were a few deep shadows amid the rocks—caves, I figured. The largest was

round, like the eye of some immense beast, and it was toward the top. The smallest were just above the surface of the waves.

I heard the sails being lowered and the hum of the repulsorlift engine dropped to a whisper.

K'zk quickly explained he didn't want to chance the sail barge's hull on finding any dark rocks hiding just above the surface, said he didn't want it ending up like the Corellians' wave-skimmer.

"The legend of Zelosian's Chine," Sevik whistled.

"That's what you were out here after, wasn't it?" Solum'ke asked him.

The Corellian nodded. "Yeah, tourist stuff—just like you."

"Wonder what we'll find?" she mused aloud.

I shook my head. "It's a ridge, nothing more, with a few caves in it."

"The prince's treasure's in one of the caves," Solum'ke said. "Etren crystals as big as my fist, the legend says."

"If this is the right ridge, and if the legend about the merchant prince is true," I cautioned. "But the treasure might be gone—if there was any to begin with. Sevik and Hanugar are evidence enough we're not the only treasure hunters on the planet. And don't forget, a lot of years have passed. Sol, don't be too hopeful about this." My words and my pheromones were doing nothing to dampen her enthusiasm.

"Take the sail raft in as close as you can." K'zk had moved up behind us. "Whatever you find—put in these sacks. Don't try to hide anything from me. We'll split it fifty-fifty."

"What about us?" Hanugar interrupted.

"You have your lives," Solum'ke said, a threatening tone laced into her sultry voice. "Fifty-fifty means two shares—ours and the Quohog's." Her pheromones backed up her threat, though the Corellians couldn't read them.

"Now, now," the Qwohog tsked, the noise sounding like an insect buzzing in his vocalizer mask. "We might spare them just a little bit if they lend a hand."

I grabbed a couple of glowrods, got in the sail raft, and helped Solum'ke climb in.

She was curious like a jarencat, and despite my best efforts I couldn't convince her to stay on the sail barge while I looked around. Sevik came along, and Hanugar took a one-man sail raft.

"Wonder what we'll find?" Solum'ke mused aloud, as I steered the sail raft closer. "Wonder what we'll find?"

"Maybe nothing," I said—again—as I tied the raft off on a rocky protrusion.

Hanugar had already landed, and was heading into the largest cave at the top, the one that seemed to look like a beast's eye. Let him have that one, I thought, as I watched him scramble inside. If I were hiding a treasure, I would put it in the least likely spot. And the least likely spot that we could see tonight seemed to be the cave I noticed closest to the water, a narrow crevice that looked like a big black wrinkle. It would be a tight squeeze. The other caves were too small to even consider. It was possible there were more caves beneath the surface.

Solum'ke nudged me forward. I hated enclosed places. And I hated treasure hunts. Give me a handful of contracts on pirates, spies, and failed smugglers—you'll get richer much faster.

Solum'ke passed a glowrod to Sevik. He still looked in sorry shape, despite her ministrations, but his eyes gleamed like hers at the prospect of wealth. Was I the only one being realistic about this? I wondered. Was I the only one who knew we would be sailing away empty-handed? Anything to humor Sol, though. Anything to make her happy. I felt her thick fingers brush my shoulder. She was right behind me. It was easy going at first, as there were few jagged edges to bite into our boots. The decades beneath the waves had smoothed the rocks' surfaces.

"Wonder what we'll find?" she whispered again.

I shrugged my broad shoulders and slid inside the crevice. The space was small, making me uneasy, and the glowrod Solum'ke held behind me lit the damp walls and sent shadows rollicking about the cramped confines. Our own silhouettes against the

rocks seemed eerie and added to my queasiness. Still, I edged forward and down, following the natural shaft, then I stopped when I heard something crunch beneath my boot. I looked at the stone floor and blinked. Bones, humanoid ones from the looks of them. They were brittle with age, but white, picked clean by melk I guessed.

“Diergu-Rea?” Solum’ke’s voice was tinged with just a touch of nervousness.

“What’d ya find?” Sevik called. He couldn’t see anything around Sol’s pleasantly stocky frame.

“What’s left of earlier treasure hunters,” I replied. Maybe they’d found the crevice on a Day of the Sepulchral Night decades ago and dallied too long, became trapped inside and drowned when the eclipse ended and the water rose. Or maybe something else had happened to them. I sped our course and wished we would have thought to buy rebreathers before we left port.

We must have been more than a dozen feet below sea level when the passage became tighter still and pools of saltwater swirled around my knees in the depressions. No wonder the Qwohog was afraid to come down here. The water had so much salt in it that even my thick skin was irritated.

To complicate matters, I felt trapped, like a caged beast. I almost signaled Sol to turn back, but something sparkled ahead, quickening even my doubting heart. I pushed myself between the shaft walls and cringed when my shirt ripped on a rock. I felt the stone cut across my shoulder blades and felt the warmth of my blood running down my back. My back would heal—Sol would see to that—but the shirt wouldn’t. And it was expensive, a gift she gave me on our first night here.

“How much farther?” Sevik called.

I didn’t know, so I didn’t answer. I continued to squeeze through the shaft and edge downward still. The walls were slick with moisture, and I suspected the glowrod-light bouncing off the water was what caught my eye. I ran my finger along the

stone in front of me and brought a drop to my lips. More saltwater. There must be cracks in the rocks someplace, letting a little bit of the sea in.

“There’s nothing here,” I whispered to Solum’ke. “Let’s turn back and hope Hanugar was more successful.”

I saw the dejected look on her face and read her pheromones that screamed disappointment, then her expression and mood instantly brightened. She was looking past me. I craned my neck and followed her gaze. Red crystals. A couple of shards sat on a ledge a little farther down. It was enough to make me forget my concerns and my claustrophobia and press onward.

“We found something!” Solum’ke passed on to Sevik. He let out a whoop behind her.

My boots crunched over more bones as I reached the niche with the crystals. Beyond, the shaft opened—as did my mouth. Myriad multicolored crystals littered the floor of a natural cavern, covering every bit of stone and twinkling merrily like fireflies in the light of the glowrod. Some crystals winked up at us from below the surface of small pools, making it impossible to tell just how deep the wealth lay. Urns, miniature statues, hammered metal idols, and more caught Solum’ke’s attention. A large wooden chest sitting amid the wealthy clutter caught mine. I let out a low whistle and padded toward it, my boot heels clinking across the crystals. I quickly knelt before the old chest. The wood stank, rotten with age.

“We’re rich!” Solum’ke cried. “Oh, Diergu-Rea, I knew there was something to the legend. I just knew it! K’zk was right!”

I looked over my shoulder. She had set her glowrod down and was scooping up crystals, letting them fall through her fingers and clink against the floor. Sevik was busy skirting the edges of the saltwater pools. He started unrolling the canvas sacks K’zk had given us and was deciding what to fill them with first.

“These crystals are old, lover,” Solum’ke said. She was holding one, almost reverently. “We’ll be set for the rest of our lives.” Bits of rotting leather were scattered here and there, remnants of

the sacks that the crystals had once been stored in. She brushed the leather aside and plunked the crystals into her own sack. "This'll buy us our own freighter, a fleet of them, maybe a moon somewhere."

I returned my attention to the chest. It had a large, primitive locking mechanism that was rusted, as were the iron bands that cut across the discolored wood. An iron plaque on top had some type of inscription on it, but it was in a language I couldn't read. I reached to my waist and retrieved a Rodian throwing razor. Jabbing the pommel at the lock made a hollow sound that reverberated around the chamber. The lock wouldn't give. But the wood was old, and I redirected my attention to prying at it. It took me quite a while. How long I'm not certain, but eventually I cut a hole in the top of the chest. I reached for a glowrod, peered into the cavity, and sucked in my breath.

"Diergu-Rea, what'd you see?"

"Gems, crowns, the wealth of a prince, Sol," I answered hoarsely. My throat had gone dry. "Crystals not quite as big as your fist, but big. We're going to be very rich."

She squealed with delight and passed me a sack. I thrust my hand in the chest's opening, my fingers closed around the gems, and I started pulling them out. The light danced across their facets, and I enjoyed the view for a moment before I dropped them in the sack. My arm worked faster, in and out of the opening, retrieving sparkling gems as black as a midnight sky, pale blue ones in the shape of tears, orange ones that brightened with the heat of my hand, and more. I dropped a green crystal necklace over Sol's head, and returned to scooping jewels into my sack. I let my thick fingers play along the surface of a large sunblaze, let myself get carried away.

I'm not sure how much time passed; time seemed irrelevant while there was all this loot about. But I know it was enough time to let me fill my canvas sack. I started stuffing my pockets full of the gems left in the bottom of the chest. I wasn't going to let even one bauble escape me.



"I can hardly lift this," Solum'ke grunted. She was a formidable Weequay, probably stronger than I, and the seams of her sack were threatening to split. "If this planet were more civilized, we could've rented droids to help us carry this."

"Not many droids on Zelos II," Sevik cut in. He was obviously strong, too. He had two bulging sacks, each tossed over a shoulder. "In fact, there's not many ..."

His words trailed off when I waved at him. I cocked my head to the side and listened. Water. "Something's wrong," I said. My pheromones told Solum'ke I was worried. I shouldered my sack, took one of the glowrods, and eased my way by Sevik and into the tunnel.

I'd made it to the narrowest part of the shaft when I realized something was very definitely wrong. A rivulet of water was running down the rocky floor, the source of the noise. At first it looked like a trickle, but as I stared, the water spread out and was coming quicker, becoming a stream. It rushed into the pools of water that were in the depressions of the tunnelway, then came out the other side like a miniature waterfall.

"Sol! We've got to get out of here, now! Grab what you've got and let's go! Fast! I think the sea is rising!"

I heard Solum'ke scabble across the crystals on the floor behind me. A glance over my shoulder revealed that Sevik's feet were rooted to the spot, his eyes transfixed on all the crystals we were leaving behind.

"Sol!" I shouted, nodding toward our guest.

She gave him a harsh nudge that seemed to snap him back to reality. He brought up the rear of our little entourage, carrying his sacks practically effortlessly. It was tougher going climbing the shaft. It was steeper than I'd realized, and the floor was slippery. As we neared the opening, the water came rushing in even faster, surging around our knees, then our thighs.

A moment later, my head poked out of the opening, and I balanced on the ledge to keep from falling into the sea—which was lapping at my waist now. I let the glowrod slip from my

fingers—I didn't need it. The sky was lighter, the eclipse ending, the tides rising quickly. I started scrambling up what was left of the ridge, motioning Sol to follow me.

Hanugar's sail raft was heading toward the barge—along the deck of which all the Qwohogs stood. Our sail raft was ruined—there was a deep gash in its hull where the repulsorlift mechanism rested. The mechanism was a useless piece of history, shattered by being dashed against a sharp coral spike. The sail raft still floated—but like a primitive boat—on the water, not above it. And it was without any power.

A wave broke against my chest, threatening to push me under. The sea was rising even faster now, and within minutes I knew we'd be treading water—or drowning if we didn't drop the gems.

"When the sea gets a little higher, I'll bring the sail barge in!" K'zk hollered. He called something else, but his words were lost by the crash of a wave against the rocks around us.

The minutes seemed to crawl by as the sea rose up to our shoulders. We watched Hanugar tie his sail raft to the rail and climb onto the barge. Hanugar's raft was pulled up.

The raft! Our raft! My eyes searched about and locked onto our damaged one. It was drifting away from us. It would do to keep us above the water.

"Hurry!" I yelled to Solum'ke, as I gestured toward the raft. I'd sighted a couple of melk heads in the distance—naturally heading in our direction—and I desperately wanted to be out of their element, fast. I felt the sting of the saltwater against my back where I'd cut it, and I knew my blood was seeping into the sea. It would lead the melk straight to us.

"Where's Sevik?" Solum'ke shouted. She'd somehow managed to reach the raft and tossed her sack into its bottom. She hefted herself over the side and started using her arms as paddles to drag the crippled raft toward me.

The water was up to my chin now, and I had to point my head toward the lightening sky to keep my mouth above it. "There's no sign of him!" I answered. "He might have drowned!"

Within a handful of heartbeats, she was tugging my sack and me into the raft. I glanced at the sail barge, at Hanugar who was standing at the railing. Then my mouth dropped open as I saw Sevik climbing up the side of the ship, his two sacks still over his shoulders. It would have been physically impossible for him to have swum so far with the weight of the crystals. Unless ... I looked closer, spotted a repulsorlift belt around his waist. “Why you slimy excuse for a Nimbanese jowl-preener ...”

The rest of my words were drowned out by a wave crashing against the side of our raft. I saw the sail barge hover higher and glide toward us.

“Throw us a line!” I yelled.

“The crystals first!” Sevik called back as he leaned over the side with a length of syntherope.

“No!” Solum’ke and I shouted practically in unison. We clutched our treasures.

K’zk was next to Sevik, peering over the side, a blaster rifle trained on Solum’ke’s beauteous face. His voice cracked through the vocalizer mask. “We’ll take all of the crystals—one way or another.”

Solum’ke made a move for her blaster. *What happened to fifty-fifty?* her pheromones asked.

“The saltwater,” I whispered to her.

I heard her groan. Our blasters would be useless, ruined by our dip in the sea. I draped my arm around her shoulders, and she slumped against me, as we gave in and watched our sacks of gems and crystals rise into the traitorous Qwohog’s sail barge.

“Just tell me,” I called up to K’zk, “Were the Corellians involved in all of this? From the first? You obviously know them.”

“Of course. Partners. Fifty-fifty,” the Qwohog replied as he eased the sail barge a few meters away from our crippled raft. “I’d received a message they were marooned, so we had to pick them up before looking for the chine. *We were all looking for Zelosian’s Chine*—they on the skimmer and me with the barge.

Two ships would have a much better chance of finding it. They truly fell afoul of the ridge, lost some of our mates in the process. Our captain won't be pleased."

"But this should mollify him!" Sevik chuckled, as he held up a big crystal.

"So why'd you need us?" I sneered.

"Insurance in case they didn't find the ridge," came the Qwohog's curt reply. "Or in case I couldn't save any of my Corellian friends. Couldn't deal with the saltwater myself, you know. Besides, you made fine extra pairs of hands. Sorry to leave you stranded—you were good sports about the whole thing—even paid to rent the sail barge. But we can't have you turning us in to the authorities before we've had a chance to get offworld."

"The corvette."

The Qwohog nodded. "Our ship. And we'd best hurry. The captain's waiting for us. Thanks for your help!"

As the moons faded and the sun came out, chasing away all signs of the eclipse, we watched the sail barge become a spot on the waves and then disappear. Our little sail raft bobbed near the reef, still afloat, protecting us from the melk.

"We'll die out here," Solum'ke said. I'd never heard her sound so sad.

"We're not that far from the coast. Other barges will be out before the day is up—headed toward the spas on Bryndas Islands. Someone will rescue us."

"We lost everything," she continued to moan. "All that treasure. All those ...". She dropped a hand to her neck, to the green crystal necklace I'd put there.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of sunblazes. "Every pocket is full," I said. "More than enough to pay our rescuers and buy passage off this place—buy us a small freighter, a new one maybe."

"And we still have our lives," she said, brightening a little.

“Very long ones,” I added. She caught the gleam in my eye. “Maybe in another dozen or so decades we can come back here—during the next Day of the Sepulchral Night.”

“Get what we left behind in Zelosian’s Chine,” she finished.

I drew her close, buried my nose against her still-damp neck. She smelled of the sea and of summer, intoxicating.

Solum’ke returned my embrace. “What are you thinking about?” she whispered after several quiet moments.

“A Qwohog.”

“And two Corellians?”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Not for the best bounty hunters in the sector,” she replied. “I think I hear another sail barge coming our way already.”

# Uhl Eharl Khoehng by Patricia A. Jackson

Twin tridents of lightning surged across the low-lying skies of Iscera. The congested atmosphere bled through in clotted tones of red and orange, as volatile gases reacted with the charged violence of the storm. Torrential gusts of wind and wet snow buffeted the hull of the *Prodigal*, layering the freighter with a secondary armor plate of thick ice. Bearing no exterior signature or running lights, the YT-1300 sat alone on an exposed pad, isolated from the main traffic of the Iscerian spaceport.

Lightning briefly illuminated the interior of the *Prodigal's* bridge. Fable Astin sat tentatively, contemplating the storm. Exhausted and sickened, the young Jedi ran her fingers through the matted tangle of her hair, draping the unruly mane over her shoulders. The tapered cut of her flight jacket accentuated her slender waist and the lengthy lines of her legs and thighs. She winced irritably, shifting position to relieve the pinch of her gray pirate leggings, which had gathered in the backs of her knees.

The slight motion rattled the heavy blaster at her hip and caused the lightsaber to fall into the cushion beside her.

Fable flipped the comm switch for the tenth time, waiting for the computer to bring up the stored message from the ship's logs. The featureless image emerged from the miniholovid, realigning itself into the face and upper torso of a woman. Prematurely gray with the burden of command, auburn hair curled at the shoulders of her uniform, which bore the insignia of a Rebel Alliance officer. "Greetings Captain Astin and to your Harrier Infiltration team. This is Commander Beatonn of the Rebel frigate, *V'muk'rk*." Beatonn paused briefly, interrupted by the distant blare of a proximity alarm. "Your objective is very clear, Captain. The Empire has begun construction of a communications bunker on Nysza III. Your orders are to destroy the bunker before it can be completed. Good luck, Captain, and may the Force be with you." The holo-communication ended amid static discharge and interference.

Fable toggled the erasure switch, deleting the transmission. It was a duty long overdue. Nearly seventeen hours had passed since the completion of their objective, which had resulted in the untimely death of her technical officer, Arecelis Acosta. "Did you know that he was half human?"

"I'd heard rumors," Deke Holman replied. The auxiliary control lights cast a surreal aura over his handsome but grim face and the shock of fiery, red hair crowning his cumbersome head. A Socorran, he was dark-skinned and rugged, wearing the traditional gold hoop in his left ear lobe. Still damp from their misadventure on Nysza III, he leaned forward and stared into the holographic etching secured on the viewscreen. He recognized his own stout figure, framed on each side by his companions. On the right, his captain and friend, Fable Astin, smiled as he tickled her neck. To the left, Arecelis Acosta was playfully feigning a punch.

The Coynite was nearly 2.2 meters tall, powerfully built at the chest and shoulders. His body was covered with a fine blanket of

blue-black fur, which was intricately braided around his neck and ears. In the etching, his thick fingers grasped at Deke's forearm, easily making the circumference of his flesh. Arecelis's other hand was balled into a fist as the Coynite feigned an incoming punch.

Deke shook his head, thoughtfully pursing his thick lips. "I'm really going to miss him." He sniffed disdainfully, slumping against the back of the acceleration chair. "No wonder there was no security in that bunker. Who would have thought a Jedi would be there?" Rubbing his forehead, he sighed, "At least you were with us."

"Didn't do Arecelis much good," Fable scoffed. Her body was bruised from her momentary encounter with Vialco, a dark Jedi assigned to the garrison. One feint and one block was all he needed to launch her across the width of the construction corridor. Trembling with rage, all Fable could do was stare up at him, as his mocking laughter echoed through the empty ceiling tiles above the complex. Her limited skills were no challenge to him, and she had undermined herself by drawing her lightsaber in anger, opening herself to the dark side.

"Smells like a gundark crawled into the nav computer and died. It reeks in here!" The exacerbad Jedi threw her gloves onto the console, acutely aware of the stench permeating the bridge. During their escape from the bunker, they had been forced to dive into a construction tunnel full of stagnant water. The scent was prolific. "We need to get out of here. Is there a bar or something in town?"

"This is pretty much a dry world, Capt'n," Deke replied. "But when I went to pick up those rations, I passed a little theater on the boulevard. Evidently, it's the last show before the winter break and the owners are giving away tickets."

"Did you get any?"

"Didn't have much of a choice. The kid nearly knocked me down trying to give the last two away."

"What's it called?"



Posing valiantly, Deke stood up and put his hand over his chest. In a deep voice, he declared, “ ‘For the Want of an Empire.’ ”

“Wonderful,” Fable grumbled, leading the way out of the flight cabin. “I can’t wait to see this.”

Against the elaborate backdrop of the stage, the clashing of swords echoed from the inner recesses of the set. The dual ended abruptly, with the edge of one prop sword slicing cleanly through the other, detonating the small charge inside to provide the dramatic effect of a lightsaber exploding through metal. Panting and fatigued, the actors separated, retreating to the far edges of the mock cave.

Fable focused on the mesmerizing movements of the lead actor. A subtle trick in the theater lighting enhanced the malevolence of his character, a tragic hero bent on destroying his one-time friend and companion. Captivated by the last moments of the scene, she sat on the edge of her seat, waiting for him to speak.

The audience gasped as the sword sliced the air only millimeters from one actor’s face, feigning the dreaded deathblow. As his rival died at his feet, the hero turned toward the audience. “Come, my good fellows,” he announced in a clear, resonating tone, “let us part this sad scene and, through our good company, make the journey shorter.” The curtain closed as the stage hands emerged to reset for the final act.

Fable sat back in her chair. “Did you see that?” She covered her mouth, laughing anxiously into her hand. “His technique is almost flawless.” Scanning the glossy holo-program, she whispered, “What’s his name?”

“Jaalib Brandl.”

“I want to meet him.” Turning on the wary Socorran, she squeezed his knees tightly. “You speak Iserian, don’t you? Talk to the owner.”

Grumbling under his breath, Deke moved away from his seat and toward the aisle. "I'll see what I can do."

Through most of the final act, Fable sat with the actor's image across her lap, comparing the picture with every minute expression of his youthful, almost adolescent face. The Force was with him and she felt it, moving through the audience with a tangible presence. She marveled at the dangerous parallel dimensions of reality and the play, where a young councilman began a slow rise into the inner circles of high government, only to discover corruption in every facet of its existence. In act two, he initiated a campaign to end the deterioration of the bureaucracy. But as his vision expanded in the third act, it became a ruthless autocracy, bent on exterminating its enemies and all who opposed it.

For the final scene, the hero stood alone in a splintered universe of his creation, devoid of hope, life, family, or friends. In a final affirmation, gazing out over the audience, he briefly met her eyes and held her captive. On his dying breath, he gasped, "For the want of an empire ... all humanity was lost."

Collapsing to the stage floor, the hero perished amid a thunderous echo of applause. Fable was one of the first to stand, eagerly applauding the performance, and joined the audience's shouted accolades as the minor characters returned to the stage to take their bows. From the side wall, she spotted Deke waving for her to join him in the aisle.

"Come on," Deke whispered, leading her out of a side door. "Most of the actors stay and hobnob with the audience, but a stage hand told me that Brandl's already heading back to his quarters."

"There he is!" Fable shouted, as the door slammed shut behind them. "That's him!" she gushed, recognizing the actor's costume robes. "Brandl!" she shouted, sliding down the icy stairwell. "Jaalib Brandl?"

The actor hesitated as the young woman scampered across the ice toward him. She was moving too rapidly for the footing,

sliding precariously with every stride. Dropping his bag, Jaalib stepped forward as her legs slipped from beneath her, anchoring the young woman in his arms. "That was quite an entrance," he teased.

"That was quite a performance!" Fable countered. Flushing crimson with embarrassment, she stepped away from him and laughed nervously, covering her reaction with a smile. "Where did you learn to use a sword like that?"

"An actor needs a variety of exotic skills," Jaalib replied with a grin. "It's the only way to insure longevity in this profession." Retrieving his bag, he whispered, "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a long flight ahead of me tomorrow. Good night, Miss ... Miss ..."

"Fable. Fable Astin."

"Good night, Miss Astin." His smile deepened. "Fable."

"Good night," Fable sighed, watching the outline of his robes vanish in the shadows of the theater courtyard. Teeth chattering, she stared into the darkness for a long moment.

"Come on, Fable!" Deke complained. "It's freezing out here. Let's get back to the ship."

The pressure in Fable's lungs was building rapidly. Trapped by stormtroopers in the construction tube, she was desperate to find a quick escape for her infiltration team. They were fifteen minutes off schedule with a load of thermal detonators on their backs, each timed to go off in less than forty minutes, regardless of their safety. If they did not reach the objective site soon, no one would be alive to complete their mission.

Fable reached in front of her, tapping Arecelis on the shoulder. As the Coynite turned, his features began to distend and shift, blending into the harsh, angular jaw of Vialco, the dark Jedi they would later encounter in the command station. "Had you given yourself to the passion, he might still be alive," he taunted. "Your feelings can do little for him now."

Yanking the lightsaber from her belt, Fable lunged savagely. She faked a left feint, deftly bringing the lightsaber down and across to the right.

“That’s it, girl! Anger is the control. Your fear is the power. And your fear is great, little one.” His voice reverberated through the darkness, washing over her consciousness. “You have taken your first small steps toward the ultimate ecstasy. Now awake and open yourself to the true power.”

*He’s in my room!* Fable thought frantically, struggling with the nightmare. The lightsaber flared in her grip, burning her hand, and she dropped it to the floor. As the weapon clanked against the deck plates, Fable woke frantically to find herself standing in the center of her cabin. She recoiled in horror when she saw her seared palm. Dropping to the floor, Fable curled into a fetal ball on the floor and rocked from side to side, desperate to quell the pain. The young Jedi called on the power of the Force to control the injury, but the throbbing wound’s anger did not subside, nor did she feel the sense of inner peace that came with the summoning of the Force.

Fumbling with the light control beside her bunk, Fable cradled her injured hand against her. She snatched the lightsaber from the deck and threw it into the mirror, shattering glass fragments across the small personal gear locker. Stumbling to the sink unit, she tripped the sensor, stifling a scream as the jets blew cool, moist air over the cauterized wound. As the soothing jets blew over her and her tears, she slumped to the floor. In one moment of grief, one step from the path of light, she had changed the course of her future, betraying herself, her love of the Jedi, and the teachings of her mother.

On the table beside her bunk, the holo-image of her mother grinned inanely at her. In the fragmented remains of the mirror, Fable saw that same face, younger and smoother; but there was something noticeably sinister about the features—her features.

“Fable!” She heard the frantic pitch in Deke’s voice as the Socorran hurried through the cabin hatch. Pulling herself up

from the floor, she slowly moved along with him as he guided her to the bunk. "What happened?" he gasped, examining the ugly wound carved into her flesh.

"It was him," Fable whispered. "He was here."

"Who?" the Socorran demanded, wrapping the burn in sterile gauze.

"Vialco. At least that's what he calls himself." She winced as the burn pulled at the tender skin. "He's coming for me. To turn me to the dark side. And there's nothing I can do to stop him!"

Ignorant of the Jedi's true troubles, Deke snarled, "You know I'll go down with you, Capt'n. What do you need me to do?"

Hiding her frightened face beneath the shadow of her long hair, she whispered, "Deke, I need you to run a background check on Jaalib Brandl. Do you have access to the civilian database?"

"Having access and getting access is the same thing to me. But how's that going to help, Fable?"

"Please Deke, I can't explain it right now," she whispered, perceiving the jealous glint in his eyes.

Deke nodded, rising to his feet. "I'm on it."

Heavy snow blanketed the exterior lots of the Iscera spaceport, throwing layer upon downy layer over the hulls of the freighters docked in the outer arena. The steady flow of large, cumbersome flakes cut visibility nearly in half, hampering Fable's efforts to see through the viewscreen into the internal docking bays nearby. "What have you found?" she asked, sitting down in the copilot's chair. A cup of soup warmed her good hand, bringing a small measure of strength to her exhausted body.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Deke sighed. Staring into the terminal, he watched the information scroll across the screen. "The civilian logs don't show very much. Jaalib Brandl, seventeen years old, orphaned at age twelve. No known relatives within the Imperial sectors. Lived with a family friend, Otias Atori, and then left to pursue a career in theater. There were no records of him

even existing before the age of twelve.” He sat back in the chair. “That’s when I got suspicious.”

“Suspicious?” Fable probed. “Why?”

“The Imperials have a sneaky practice of creating people, swapping records to implant operatives among the populace. The only way to trace them is through their records. If you look hard enough, every once in a while,” he smirked confidently, “you’ll find a hole.”

“Like no records before a certain age?”

“Uh-huh. So I started cross-referencing in that Imperial database we intercepted. Only I forgot to use his first name. Look what came up.” The image of an older man appeared on the screen. There was a brooding, sinister edge to his handsome face, a piercing glare and an arrogant smirk that gave the impression that he was posing. “See any family resemblance?”

“Lord Adalric Brandl,” Fable read the information. “An actor?”

“And this was his biggest and best role yet.” Deke tapped the control panel. A restricted information bar flashed across the screen as he accessed the code.

Fable set her cup aside, afraid that her trembling hands might spill the hot liquid into her lap. “An Imperial Inquisitor? Brandl’s father is a Jedi-killer?”

“The Alliance has official notices about this maniac all over the network. Avoid at all costs, executive order 2354. This guy was bad news.”

“Was?”

“Evidently Brandl went rogue and took off, prompting a galaxywide manhunt. They found him,” Deke shuddered, “following a string of corpses that he left from one sector to the next. And when they finally caught him, he went berserk and committed suicide.” The status line scrolled over the image of Brandl’s face, flashing the word “Deceased” across the screen.

“What’s that?” Fable pointed to the corner of the terminal.

"It's an Imperial code about notifying next of kin. This one means the body was never recovered."

"Never recovered? Never recovered by the family or never found?"

"Can't tell you, Capt'n. Wasn't there."

Fable strummed her fingers lightly against her thigh, feeling the lightsaber's slight weight against her hip.

"I've seen that look before," Deke grumbled pensively. Fumbling with the control panel, he reached into the mass confusion of the circuitry boards beneath the shield generator controls and retrieved a dusty bottle of Socorran raava. "Here," he gave it to her. Then removing the earring from his lobe, he handed the golden hoop to her as well. "I noticed the port manager is Socorran. Give him the earring and tell him you need a ship. Then give him the bottle and let him know that he can discuss the terms with me."

Fable wiped at her cheek, feeling the moisture beneath her fingertips. "You're a good friend, Deke."

"That's what they tell me," he sighed, propping his legs against the console. "Now go on," he fussed, "before I change my mind."

Quietly, Fable walked into the corridor beyond the flight bridge.

"Fable?" Deke whispered, as she hesitated, lingering beneath the bulkhead. "If Brandl's alive, he's got nothing to lose."

"At this point, Deke, neither do I."

The hyperdrive cue pulsed, startling Fable to consciousness. She rubbed at the bruise swelling on her forehead where she had knocked it soundly against the canopy of the X-wing. "No bad dreams?" she sighed with a half smile. From above, an abrupt movement distracted her and before she could utter one sound, the body of Arecelis came crashing through the cockpit shield, bringing the icy grasp of space. As the air was drawn from her

lungs, Vialco stood over her, straddling the cockpit and mocking her with his deep, throaty laughter.

Fable shrieked, slapping hysterically at the mutilated corpse cradled in her lap; but there was nothing there. Frantically craning her neck to get a full view of the outside canopy, she saw nothing but the brilliant lines and colors of hyperspace, as they began to retract into the telltale pinpoints of distant planets and stars. Reeling from the traumatic nightmare, she collapsed against the acceleration chair.

The emerald-gold face of Trulalis emerged before her as the X-wing materialized from hyperspace. Quickly engaging the engines, she braced for the atmospheric entry. Scanning her sensors, Fable checked the data screens, which were inundated with immediate life-sign readings. The sensors began tracing the ion signature, automatically pinpointing the trace of a light shuttle. Setting a similar course, she eventually landed outside the perimeter of a small settlement.

From the ground, Trulalis was breathtaking and majestic. Fable found herself captivated by the noble black trees whose leaves radiated a green hue when struck by direct sunlight. With massive, arching branches, the trees formed a shaded corridor above the overgrown trail. Enjoying the quiet walk, Fable rechecked her sensor information, confirming that the life signs she had received were mostly animal in nature. The settlement structures the computer had uncovered were void of any life. As she came closer, it was apparent why.

Strewn about the outskirts of the common, she found the remains of stormtrooper armor. There were no bodies inside, but the unmistakable blast scoring across the chests were disturbing evidence of a failed retaliation against the Empire, as were the skeletal remains of their victims, which were half buried in the loose topsoil nearby. At the settlement gates, she stared into the desolate streets where wreckage and debris were scattered from one end of the broad avenue to the next.



The body of a small bantha lay in the doorway of a narrow shelter. Shrunken and thin, its thick hide had been preserved by the nurturing Trulalis soil. Manicured gardens had gone to seed, spreading erratically over the front lawns and the dilapidated remains of the abandoned cottages. In one shelter, Fable found the transport shuttle, which had been assigned to Jaalib—she knew she was on the right track.

The only true survivor of the Imperial onslaught sat in the center of the settlement. Its shadow stood over her in silent testament of its endurance. Fable stared up and up, until her eyes could take in the enormity of the ancient theater. Blast scoring had scarred the pristine limestone obelisk, leaving a blemish of tragedy etched into the elaborate design. Hemmed in by stone fences and gates, the gardens were immaculately trimmed and manicured, tapered back from the winding garden paths, which wound and curved into the enormous entrance. Two stone pillars framed the central portal, casting grotesque, disembodied shadows over the archway.

Mustering her courage, she stepped into the immense antechamber. Her eyes took in the magnificence of tapestries and display cases, each showing the relics of prop swords, ornate jewelry, and costumes used in the various stage productions. She heard voices echoing from the right wing and followed instinctively, attuned to the familiar strength of Jaalib's voice.

"You are a thief, a liar, and a pawn!" Jaalib spat in a frantic voice. Fable hesitated in the doorway, staring across the darkened auditorium.

"A thief? A liar? A pawn?" another voice commented. "Are these not the greatest virtues of any good king?"

"Virtue—" Jaalib broke off, his face contorted in an uncharacteristic mask of rage.

"Your concentration is off," the stranger whispered. "Perhaps we're moving too quickly."

"No, it's me!" The despondent sound of his voice echoed in the dusty spaces above the stage. "I keep seeing you, hearing you

play the part and then,” he stumbled, “I see my own clumsy attempts.” Anxiously brushing a hand through his dark hair, he managed a weak smile. “Perfection is never easy, Father, especially when it’s your perfection.”

From his throne, in the shadowed backset of the stage, Adalric Brandl chuckled softly. The rustling of his cumbersome black robes sent whispering vibrations over the front rows as he stepped down from the raised dais. “Of all the tragedies ever conceived, *Uhl Eharl Khoehng* is the greatest,” Brandl said with conviction. “The role of the Edjian-Prince is the most difficult and the actor who plays it,” he paused, “is assured greatness.”

“How old were you? The first time you performed it?”

“I was nearly thirty before Otias would even permit me to read for the part.” Brandl snorted with warm pleasure. “You are a young man, Jaalib.” Placing a comforting hand on Jaalib’s shoulders, he whispered, “You were born for this part. Give yourself time to grow into it.”

Recognizing Brandl’s profile, Fable slowly walked down the center aisle toward the stage. Hands crossed shamefully in front of her, she met Brandl’s curious eyes as his gaze fell over her. “Lord Brandl ...” she faltered, staring into the shadows.

“Fable!” Jaalib hissed. Jumping down from the platform, he charged her, robes billowing from his shoulders. “What are you doing here?”

Fable could hear his voice, but only distantly. She could feel the harsh pinch of his fingers on her wrists, but felt no pain. Caught in Brandl’s intense gaze, she could not move. His presence was overpowering and Fable found herself deeply intrigued by the somber charm and magnificence of this strange man, himself a tragic hero, trapped in the torrent of some inconceivable drama.

Her eyes cautiously traced the noble angle of his forehead and brow, noting the gentle curvature of his nose, his mouth, and the regal set of his chin. Faint laugh lines framed thin, pale lips, fading into the surrounding tautness of his cheekbones. Waves of

black hair betrayed streaks of silver running through the closely cropped sides, shadowing Brandl's solemn face. At his right temple, obtuse veins of scar tissue erupted from the otherwise smooth skin, winding a cruel path around the outer edges of his eye. Severely traumatized, the eye itself was damaged, sheathed in the pupilless, irisless remains of a clear, yellowed orb.

"Fable!" Jaalib shouted, shaking her.

"Jaalib," Brandl whispered, "mind your manners. An audience, even an audience of one, is always to be treasured and respected."

Glaring at her, Jaalib hissed, "You shouldn't have come here!"

Fable glanced at him briefly and then moved away, refusing to acknowledge that she agreed with him.

"An admirer, Jaalib?"

"Yes, Father, but she was just leaving." Before Jaalib could herd her back up the aisle, he felt the light restraint of his father's hands.

Drawn to the innocence of the young woman's frightened eyes, Brandl closed the distance between them. With hesitation, he caressed Fable's smooth cheek, gently lifting her chin to raise her eyes. Astonished by the strength in her gaze, Brandl smiled pleasantly. "There is no frailty here," he whispered with a narcissistic grin. His eyes narrowed dubiously as he took her bandaged hand, warming her cold fingers in the warmth of his touch. "The dark side beckons with the promise of easy gain, but there is always a price, always a tribute to its passion."

Fable swallowed, struggling to find her voice. "I ... I," she stammered, "Lord Brandl, I need you ... to ..."

"Weigh your words carefully, young woman, do not waste time counting them." Turning to Jaalib, he gently pressed her toward his son. "Jaalib, take our guest to a comfortable room. She will stay the night."

Shoulders hunched in rage, Jaalib led Fable up the wide aisle, leading her out of the grand hall auditorium.

An excruciating cramp in her leg brought Fable to consciousness. She bolted frantically from the bed, scanning the shadows for signs of movement. Taking her lightsaber from beneath the pillow, she assumed the ready stance, waiting for the unseen phantom to strike. But there were no shadows to fight, except her own. “No bad dreams?” Stiff from the close quarters of the X-wing, she felt surprisingly well and rested. Snorting softly, Fable sat down on the bed. “No bad dreams!” she cheered into her pillow. Her optimism was short-lived as a knock sounded at the door. Momentarily, the latch cleared and the door parted. Pulling the blanket over her body, Fable swallowed a moment of fear, relieved when Jaalib’s brooding face peered into the chamber.

“The morning meal is ready,” he growled.

“I’ll be right there.” As the door closed, she hurried from the bed and dressed quickly. Ignoring her flight jacket, she pulled the fine linen shirt over her head and shoulders, leaving the long ends to hang over her leggings. In the darkened corridor outside her room, Jaalib was waiting. “This way.”

As the sweet aroma of sausage and boiling cereal filtered through her nostrils, Fable’s stomach rumbled appreciatively. Painfully aware of her hunger and of the young actor’s annoyance, she waited for him to sit down at the small table. A series of large flame ovens lined the back of the room behind him. Fable waited until Jaalib took the first bite, then eagerly began filling her plate with steaming broth and several links of sausage.

Hearing only the clang of her utensils, she looked up to find Jaalib glaring at her. There was a deep-seated loathing behind his eyes. Gazing about the small, crude kitchen, she realized that they

were alone. "Where is Lord Brandl?" she whispered, hoping he would ignore her.

"You shouldn't have come here!"

Piqued by his cruel tone, Fable slammed her fork against the plate. "Why don't you just butt out of it!"

"He won't help you," the actor snarled. "Others have come. Like you. So why don't you just get your things, and I'll walk you back to your ship."

"I said, where is he?" Fable hissed with premeditated venom.

"He's in the Barrows," Jaalib relented. "He's been waiting for you."

"The Barrows?" she questioned around a mouthful of hot broth.

"The graveyard."

Outside in the cold dawn, storm clouds swept the sky. Wishing for her flight jacket, Fable shivered, hugging herself as the cool breeze fluttered through her hair and the thin fabric of her shirt. Trotting up the back landscape of steps and garden porches, she wandered into the rear courtyards of the theater, needing no specific direction to follow the dark presence of Lord Brandl. She followed a short path to the outskirts of Kovit, where the ground rose and fell in an irregular series of earthen mounds and grassy knolls. Up the steepest mound, she halted on the crest, finding herself surrounded by wax cylinders, hundreds of them, mounted atop slender pedestals, which were buried in the soft ground. Metallic ball bearings were precariously perched on each cylinder, giving the appearance of small, blue flames.

Across from her, on the opposite mound, Brandl stood with his back to her, at the foot of an enormous sarcophagus. The grainy image of a woman had been carved into the lid, delicately outlining the lace and fabric of the gown she was laid to rest in. "The Jedi is his own worst enemy," Brandl declared. "The greatest conflict comes from within. Our Masters teach us, scold us," he hesitated, "command us to follow reason, not our emotions."

"You disagree?" Fable asked, stepping into the center of the wax cylinders.

"Where there is smoke, there is fire." Brandl straightened, staring down his nose at her for a long moment. "Vialco is a coward. His tactics are mere illusions, prey for the weak-minded."

Brushing off the possible insult, Fable shrugged. "But he is powerful." Shaking her head remorsefully, she whispered, "I can't beat him. At least, I don't think so."

"Losing is not an option ... it's a conscious decision. You will not know until you try."

"Trying isn't good enough! I have to succeed or—"

"Or he may succeed in his attempts to lure you to the dark side? How do you know that I will not turn you?"

Fable felt a tremor down her back. "I don't."

"The student's greatest achievement is attained through succession," Brandl began, "a succession which requires the destruction of the Master. This is what the dark side teaches us. But what you must always remember is that when we embrace the darkness, we are already masters in the design of fate, humbling ourselves as students." He leaned heavily against the massive stone tomb. "When we seek the dark side, we seek our doom. Too often, we are successful."

"So you'll help me?"

"Vialco's undoing is inevitable. Even I have seen this."

"So I'll win, right?"

Brandl gently tugged at the clasp of his robe, loosening the collar. "If you're looking for visions, Fable, sit quietly and dwell on your past. Now prepare yourself. See the ball bearing directly ahead of you, sitting atop the wax cylinder? Draw your lightsaber and strike it. Destroy only the metal bearing. Leave the wax unharmed."

Fable hesitated, deliberately slow in assuming the ready stance. Breathing with effort, she stared at the ball bearing, her wounded hand tingling from her last experience with the lightsaber.

“The dark side’s influence is stronger in moments of weakness. Do not let yourself be distracted. Now strike.”

Fable drew the lightsaber from her belt, concentrating on its ignition. Swinging in a wide arc, she struck at the ball bearing, elated as it evaporated into nothingness, leaving the wax cylinder slightly scorched but unharmed. She disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready stance, unable to hide the arrogant smirk etched across her features.

“When climbing great mountains, it is always best to begin at a slow pace,” Brandl remarked quietly. “Now strike for two.”

Without waiting to focus on the pedestal’s position, she ignited the lightsaber and struck two blows, swinging the blade toward the ball bearings and disintegrating them as the cylinders remained untouched. Overwhelmed with confidence, she again disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready position, eager to begin the next phase.

“No gain comes without a price. I will be your mentor and you my pupil. You will forever carry the distinguishment of my presence, as well as the taint,” he stumbled over the word, “the traits of my own Masters.”

“You mean the Emperor,” Fable whispered, “don’t you?”

“I chose the path that led me to this life,” Brandl continued, “I will lead you on a parallel course, where I will show you the glories of the light and the majesty of the dark.” He nodded, indicating the next alignment of wax cylinders. “Now strike for ten.”

Fable faltered for a moment; then fresh with the assurance of her performance, she ignited the lightsaber and charged, working her way through the line. As she reached for the fourth cylinder, she felt herself floundering. Furiously struggling to the fifth, she sliced neatly through the cylinder and knocked the ball bearing at her feet. In a failed attempt to rally for the sixth, she tripped and fell into the wet earth, taking several stands and cylinders with her.

Brandl slowly descended from the mound, stepping just inside the perimeter of the training circle. Shamefully rising to her feet, Fable flinched as he drew his lightsaber and moved toward her. With a resonating power that spread out from it in all directions, the lightsaber became a smear of brilliance as Brandl worked his way through the wax cylinders. He destroyed one ball bearing after another, leaving no perceptible mark on the wax. Fable watched in awe as the weapon danced through a score or more of ball bearings before Brandl completed the cadence and disengaged the weapon. Gawking at the craftsmanship, she turned to Brandl. "You really are a Jedi Master."

"Only fools admire what they see," he hissed evenly, brushing past her. "I know ... for once I was a fool." The first drops of rain began to fall, quickly covering the barrows with a slick film of water and loose earth. "You will continue this exercise until you have mastered it properly. Only then may you return to the theater."

"And if I can't," Fable insisted.

"You know where your ship is docked. Don't hesitate to go back to wherever it is you came from." He left her alone, with no further comment.

Nearly eight hours later, Fable walked through the stormy deluge of rain, listening to the frigid drops against her shoulders. Every chafing step brought her closer to the theater and closer to a temper tantrum of monumental proportions. Jaalib was waiting for her at the door with a modest smile and a warm blanket. "He asks the impossible!" she hissed.

The actor draped the blanket over her shoulders. "Your dinner's getting cold."

Fable pushed through the door of her room, startled to find a heavy plasteel tub in the center of the floor, steaming with hot water. "A bath?" she whispered wearily. "Oh," she groaned, stumbling across the floor, discarding boots, socks, and belt as she moved across the room. About to pull the muddy shirt over



her arms, Fable hesitated, feeling a draft from the door, where Jaalib stood, watching her. "Do you mind?"

Flushing with embarrassment, he stepped back into the shadows. "I'll bring your dinner later," he stammered and closed the door behind him.

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As its orbital axis began its seasonal tilt, Trulalis was thrust into a tempestuous season of torrential rainfall and thunderstorms. Dawn showers became steady downpours by the afternoon, flooding the gutted lowlands with muddy water and the persistent rumble of thunder. Above the biting autumn breeze, the hum of a lightsaber was interrupted by the rattle of falling pedestals, wax cylinders, and ball bearings as Fable blundered through the exercise.

Brandl watched with mounting dissatisfaction. As the last pedestal fell to the saturated earth, he stormed down from his high mound. "You little fool! Do it again!"

Fable braced herself against the malevolent voice, glaring at the ground, too frightened to meet Brandl's cruel eyes. Despite a streak of improvement, she was steadily losing ground and his frustration was proof of that, as were the whispered obscenities spoken vehemently under his breath. She watched his broad, swaying shoulders as the Jedi Master started back up the mound to his stony, sarcophagus throne.

"How eager you young upstarts are to give yourself to the Force, demanding tribute from it, as if you were the source of the power. The Force does not thrive on the basis of whether you live or breathe! It exists because it has always been so! Begin again!"

Grateful to the rain for hiding her tears of humiliation, Fable tucked the lightsaber into her muddy leggings and started up the opposite mound. Defying Brandl's command, she headed for the

dark solace of the theater, where Jaalib would be waiting for her with a warm blanket and a much-needed kind word.

Enraged by her failure to comply, Brandl pursued her, throwing accusations and threats of retribution. Though Fable had seen only traces of it, she recognized the temperament and arrogance that must have been the beginning of Brandl's descent into the Emperor's power. And though she felt numb from the onslaught of his dreary emotions, she had transcended his mental barriers and become an admiring witness to the dedication and devotion that had kept him whole through the trial of his life. He was a man who would stop at nothing to accomplish his goals and he would kill her in an instant, if it so suited his purpose. And the time they had spent together, learning and growing, would hold no bearing on his decision. Sickened by the thought, Fable found herself in a position to admire and loathe the fallen Jedi.

Fable slowly pushed through the door of the theater. It was early and Jaalib was not there as she had expected. Emotionally spent and demoralized, she nearly collapsed right there at the threshold, desperate for the young actor's support after yet another dismal day of training. As she stepped from the rain, Brandl was right behind her with another scathing assault. "The Force is your enemy! Turn your back on it and it will destroy you! It is your lover! Lust for it! Spurn it and it will devour you in fire. But go to it, as a child to its mother, make yourself humble before the omnipotence of its existence and it will guide you beyond the shallow confines of this mortal world!"

Alarmed by the commotion, Jaalib hurried into the antechamber, placing himself between Fable and his father. Bordering on obvious hysteria, she stumbled into his arms, dampening his shoulder with well-deserved tears. Putting the blanket over Fable's trembling shoulders, Jaalib gently sent her off to her room. "Your bath is waiting," he whispered quietly. "I'll be there in a moment."

Waiting for the girl's shadow to dissipate in the adjoining darkness, Brandl hissed, "She's impossible!"

"Odd," Jaalib chuckled, handing his father a steaming cup of broth, "she said the same about you."

"She is so charged with emotion and sentiment!" he growled, allowing his emotions to show through the aloof veneer. "It's as if your mother never—" his voice broke off abruptly, "as if your mother never left us."

"She didn't leave us," Jaalib replied matter-of-factly. "She died, defending me from stormtroopers. Stormtroopers and Jedi hunters who came looking for you." He sniffed at the absurdity of his mother's devotion to the man who had abandoned them, only to return eight years later, bringing the darkness of his life with him. "When they didn't find you, they found a way to justify the cost of their visit by obliterating the village."

"Courtesy costs little, Edjian-Prince, and discourtesy can rob even the richest man of his fortune."

Feigning anger, Jaalib drew away from his father, recognizing the famous line. "Courtesy?" he declared impishly. "Then no more call me Edjian-Prince. Dress me in rags and let me be a poor, rude man."

Brandl's face brightened with the spontaneous performance. "You've been practicing! Excellent! You're finding the right voice for the part. Come," he whispered eagerly, pulling Jaalib against him, "we should use this moment to complete the final act." Together, they vanished into the shadows of an adjoining corridor.

Relaxed and warm beneath the downy comforters, Fable resisted the notion of rising. She laid very still, waiting for the inevitable knock on the door. "Come in."

"You're awake?" Jaalib remarked, peering inside.

"I'm usually awake," she chuckled. "I just pretend to be asleep so you'll feel sorry for me."

“Why would you want me to feel sorry for you?”

“Come on,” she rolled her eyes. “You’ve father is the most difficult man I’ve ever known, Jaalib.” Sitting up on her elbows, she teased, “Look what I’ve been going through and then tell me you don’t feel some sympathy.”

“Consider yourself fortunate. He was a lot worse, believe me.”

“Worse?” she scoffed. “What do you mean?”

“In the last five years, he had to be a father, a mother,” Jaalib sighed sadly, “as well as a mentor. It changed him.”

“I knew I would have to work hard,” Fable said, “but I was certain that all the work would be keeping him from luring me to the dark side.”

“Has he tried?”

“I don’t think so. Every time I feel it coming on, he stops me and tells me to make the right choice. My choice.” She yawned, throwing the comforter to the side. “I’d better go.”

“My father’s not here,” Jaalib said. “He’s going to be away for a few days; so there’s no training, unless you do it on your own.” He forced himself to face her openly, allowing himself only the solace of the shadows about them to conceal his apprehension. “I was hoping you might go on a picnic with me. To make up for my behavior.”

“Your behavior?”

“You remember, when you first arrived.” He laughed softly. “I all but attacked you. It was inexcusable.”

“And perfectly justified. You were protecting the person who is most important to you. I would have done nothing less.” Patting the side of the bed, she beckoned him to sit down beside her. “My mother was a Jedi. She trained my father and then watched him die at the hands of a rival. After that, we spent most of our time running from the Emperor.” Fable shook her head sadly. “I was only a baby, but I remember it well. Living with a Jedi,” she paused thoughtfully, “you learn to hide your emotions, especially the hurtful ones. My mother never knew how I felt.” Fable sighed as the strain of those emotions returned. “Then one

day, I picked up a lightsaber and let go!” She giggled. “I don’t know who was more surprised, my mother or me. That’s when I began my training, whether I liked it or not.” Fable shrugged away the arduous memories. “Now about that picnic, I’m starving.”

“We’ll have to hike, I’m afraid. The Empire didn’t leave much behind in the way of transportation. Not even a bantha. Do you mind?”

“It’ll be relaxing. Come on.”

The Khoehng Heights were located nearly five kilometers outside the perimeter of the Kovit Settlement. Long overgrown by wild wheat, the trail leading into the mountain pass had narrowed, no longer marked with the footsteps of the farmers who once tended it. It was a rare, clear morning. Storm clouds loomed in the distance, held back by a persistent wave of warm breezes blowing through the lowlands. From the Heights, Fable scanned the panoramic view of the countryside. She could see the winding trail that led into the base of the lower mountains. The footpath climbed to give her inquisitive eyes the full benefit of the view.

Fable sighed with immeasurable pleasure, her stomach full of warm sweet cakes and honeysticks. She endured Jaalib’s gentle caress at her cheek, as he playfully wiped the excess sweet powder from her face. “I’ve been in space too long,” she whispered, taking a deep breath. “It’s so beautiful here.”

“After they left,” Jaalib whispered, “we were cut off. No supplies, no medicinal goods, nothing. There was plenty of food ready for harvesting, but there was no one left to do it.”

Fable hummed a melancholy tune. Shivering in the mountain air, she turned to Jaalib and held his gaze as he draped his cloak over her shoulders. “Why do they call this place the Khoehng Heights? Is that Old Corellian?”

“There’s an outdoor theater built into the side of this mountain,” he replied, indicating a slight, stony ridge. “This place

is named for the first play ever performed there nearly five hundred years ago.”

“Five hundred years ago?” she gasped.

“*Uhl Eharl Khoehng*. *Khoehng* is Old Corellian for king. The *eharl* comes from Socorran mythology.” He shrugged uncertainly. “It means elf or trickster.”

Reminded of her Socorran companion, Deke, Fable felt a pang of remorse for leaving him. Her thoughts were abruptly diverted by a clap of thunder overhead. The skies released a deluge of cold rain. Frantically gathering the blankets and remaining baskets of food, Fable held on to Jaalib’s hand as they sprinted over the ridge. Their voices and laughter reverberated against the hollowed side of the mountain, as they slid down the precarious face of the moss-covered bank and into the shadowy protection of the antiquated theater.

An overhanging eave of solid rock covered the main stage and the first few rows of the audience pit. Cob-webbed and damp, the ancient structure stood in a silent tribute to its creators. Ragged tapestries hung from the rock walls, covered with mold, grime, and clay from the decaying structure. A few prop swords and robes were arranged on the inner panels of the stage and a multitude of candles and pedestals stood to either side of the audience pit, centuries-old relics left behind by a more playful, tolerant age.

“I used to come here as a boy,” Jaalib confessed. Extending his arms to either side, he declared, “Now this was true theater, by candlelight, in an age which understood and coveted its artisans.”

“*Uhl Eharl Khoehng*,” Fable whispered dubiously. “What’s it about?”

“It opens on a distant world, in a kingdom built in the center of a dark forest. After many years of ruling this kingdom, the good, wise king dies and his handsome son,” Jaalib winked, “the Edjian-Prince, takes the throne.”

“I thought you said this was a tragedy.”

"It is a tragedy," Jaalib scolded, "and that becomes apparent when the Edjian-Prince decides to expand the kingdom and begins sending expeditions into the forest to mark trees for felling. The men he sent never returned." He narrowed his eyes, moving his face very close to hers. "And that is when the older folk began whispering about *uhl Eharl Khoehng*."

"Stop it!" Fable hissed, batting his hands away as he tried to frighten her.

"The Edjian-Prince was intrigued. He began sending daily messengers into the forest, carrying his invitation to the Eharl Khoehng to dine with him in the palace. None returned. When there were no more messengers, he sent small armies, keeping only the best and strongest warriors to guard the kingdom. They did not return. When the townspeople demanded a halt to this dangerous ambition, the Edjian-Prince ordered his remaining army to drive them all into the forest. None, not even the soldiers, were heard from again." Lighting two candles, he moved the pedestals into the center of the stage. "Only the Edjian-Prince and his faithful old hunt servant remained."

"He sent the old man?" Slapping Jaalib's thigh, Fable hissed, "This is a terrible story! What happened to the Edjian-Prince after the old man left?"

"When his servant did not return, the Edjian-Prince barricaded himself in the palace. Without his armies or his subjects, there was nothing to stop the Eharl Khoehng from attacking. One quiet night," Jaalib whispered, "the Eharl Khoehng did come, invading the Edjian-Prince's dreams. He promised safe passage through the forest. Eager to make peace, the Edjian-Prince went into the wood, where he remained for nearly a decade."

"What!"

"The Eharl Khoehng tricked him. While he did have safe passage through the forest, food, clothing, and shelter, the Eharl Khoehng held him prisoner, using illusions to trap him in the labyrinth of the forest." Jaalib blew out one of the candles. "Ten

years of guilt took its toll. The prince thought he heard the voices of his subjects crying out to him. Then one day, he was startled by the spirit of his beloved huntsman. The old man reported that the Eharl Khoehng had turned the townspeople into trees and left them there in the woods, conscious, but unable to move or speak, except when the wind blew through their branches.”

“And then?”

“And then,” Jaalib whispered, “unaffected by the Eharl Khoehng’s illusions, the huntsman led his master on a journey to the outer edge of the forest, where the Eharl Khoehng was waiting for them.” A malevolent shadow fell over his face as Jaalib stepped into the center of the stage, posing beside the lit candle. “ ‘Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including your kingdom,’ the Eharl Khoehng said.”

“And what did the Edjian-Prince do?”

“He went mad,” Jaalib began in the narrative voice. “He ran back into the wood and set fire to it. By the time he was finished, there was nothing left, not one tree. ‘This is the only kingdom I deserve to rule,’ he declared, ‘and the only kingdom that the Eharl Khoehng can claim.’ ” Taking one of the blackened tapestries from the wall, he threw the thick material over his left shoulder and continued the narration. “Dressed in the rags of his former life, hands and face blackened with soot, the Edjian-Prince went before the Eharl Khoehng, falling to his knees in homage. In his loudest, most humble voice, he cried, ‘Long ... live ... the king.’ ”

Visibly moved, Fable applauded, shaking her head with wonderment. “Your father played that part?”

“The Edjian-Prince was my father’s greatest role,” Jaalib said absently. “No one has been able to bring the same dignity to the role.” He sat down on the edge of the stage. “And when the time is right, we’ll produce it again and I will be the Edjian-Prince and he shall be my nemesis, uhl Eharl Khoehng himself.”

Fable chewed anxiously at her lower lip. “Jaalib, why didn’t you become a Jedi?”



“All I ever wanted to be was an actor,” he remarked, swinging his legs against the stage. “And that’s exactly what I’ve become. I’ve learned the lightsaber and other meditations of the Jedi, mostly to appease my troubled sense of loyalty. Beyond these, my father seems reluctant to teach me any more. And I’m reluctant to ask.”

Staring at the rows of candles, Fable was reminded of the wax cylinder exercise. “The lightsaber exercise, the one using the ball bearings? Can you do it with candles?”

Jaalib shrugged. “That’s how he taught me. I never used the wax cylinders until much later.”

“Can you show me your secret? Your execution is almost flawless, elegant and equally effective.”

Assembling the pedestals in the familiar circle, Jaalib motioned for her to step inside the exaggerated diameter. “May I?” he teased, gently embracing her from behind. He placed his hands on top of hers and ignited the lightsaber. The elongated shaft pulsed with magnificence and power, throwing light across the stage and the first few benches in the pit. Fable stiffened for a moment, feeling his body so intimately against her. But as he guided her through a slow rotation with the lightsaber, she relaxed and concentrated on his directives. “What do you see?” he whispered.

Staring down the line of unlit candles, Fable’s eyes traced the straight, angular path. “No,” Jaalib whispered, reading the expression of her body. “This is why you’re having such a hard time.”

“You’ve been watching me?” she hissed, elbowing him in the ribs.

Jaalib laughed softly. “You’re trying to think in linear terms, spatial dimensions. It’s not like flying a starship. You can train your eyes, which you’ve done quite well, but sooner or later, he’ll catch you.” Moving her gently to the side, he added, “You may let your eyes dictate where the lines begin, but let the Force guide you. It’s not like clearing a room and then moving on to the next.

There is no sequence, except the one you create as you move along. There are always several paths, right to left, top to bottom, any combination.”

He removed the lightsaber from her hands and began the cadence. His movements were slow and deliberate so that she could follow him, but even these motions were faster than her most frenzied attempts to complete the exercise. As the lightsaber swept over the tops of the candles, the small wicks exploded with flame, but the wax tips remained unscarred by the weapon. Quickly moving around the circle to blow out the flames, Jaalib handed the lightsaber back to her. “Now you try.”

Fable swallowed doubtfully, wondering how she would follow such a flawless performance. Igniting the lightsaber, her eyes traced the several lines of candles as they extended out in every direction. She arced swiftly through the circle, feeling the confidence of her former self return. Ten, fifteen, eighteen. As she reached the last movements of the cadence, she lost control, pitching forward as she spun frantically on her heels.

“Easy,” Jaalib crooned, catching her in his arms. “You were doing wonderfully until you lost your concentration.” Blowing out the candles, he said, “Try again. And this time, remember, the Force is a waterfall. Nothing can stop or turn it off. Nothing can divert the flow.” Scolding her with a stern finger, he added, “Doubt and uncertainty form barriers, but only if you let them.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like your father.”

In response, he bowed ceremoniously, then motioned toward the candles. This time, as she moved through the circle, Fable allowed the rain to guide and open her to the Force. The steady beat of the drops against the stone benches steadied her concentration and she completed the cadence without incident.

She disengaged the lightsaber, trembling slightly as she turned from the center of the circle. The Force was flowing through her, still channeling her conscious mind. Jaalib was behind her and Fable could feel his heart racing above the gentle vibrations of

the Force. Before her nerve could fail, Fable turned and kissed him passionately.

“Shall we try it again?” he whispered.

“Rogue!”

Jaalib grinned, winking mischievously. “The cadence, I mean.” His grin deepened as he stepped into the circle and began to blow out the candles.

The Force was with her and Fable felt it, flowing through her mind and body. She imaged the power channeling through her arms and hands and grasped the lightsaber from her belt. Visualizing the path in her mind, she moved through a series of precise parries and feints, disintegrating the first several balls with faultless execution. As she began the second half of the cadence, Brandl whispered, “Execute each motion as though it were your last. Someday, your life may depend on it. Or the lives of others.”

For nearly two hours, Fable worked through the first cadence and was moving onto the second. Obviously fatigued, she began making poor judgment errors and scorched the tops of the last ten cylinders, slicing through the last one at the conclusion. She stepped back into the ready stance, gasping for breath.

“As you progress, you will learn the limits of your abilities,” Brandl stated. “You are excused for the remainder of the day.”

Bowing respectfully, Fable pulled her jacket from a nearby branch and started on the trail back to the theater. Jaalib was waiting for her with a sweet cake and the promise of a bath and a kiss. “How did it go?”

“I made it to the second cadence!” she whispered with excitement. “And Jaalib, I think I saw him smile.”

“Now *that* is good news.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she winked at him. “I think I’ll go to bed early tonight, as a reward. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Father and I are working on the last act of the play.” He smiled pleasantly, betraying his affection. “See you in the morning.”

Fable awoke to a terrible sense of foreboding. Quickly dressing, she sat tentatively at the edge of the bed, hugging her knees against her chest as she scanned the shadows. Something was terribly wrong and she could feel it. Cradling the lightsaber in her lap, she took a deep breath, assured that she was ready for the worst, whatever that may be, whenever it might come.

The familiar knock came at her door. “Come in,” she replied, eager to share her concerns with Jaalib. But as the door opened, she was greeted by the foreboding shadow of her mentor. “Where’s Jaalib?”

“Jaalib is the one and only treasure left to my miserable existence,” Brandl snarled. “I forbid this to happen. I forbid it!”

“Where is he? I want to talk to him!”

Advancing into the room, Brandl cornered her. “The theater on Iscera will be opening in a few days. I sent him there to make preparations for our production. By the time he returns, you will be gone.”

Fable followed Brandl into the corridor with heavy, angry strides, allowing her emotions to seethe within her. On the verge of a temper tantrum, she braced herself as common sense called on her to reason. She had come to Trulalis to improve herself, to get an edge on the enemy who pursued her, and then to return, if possible, to her friends in the Rebel Alliance. Falling in love had no place in that design.

Brandl set a bowl of steaming broth at the end of the table and sat down on the opposite end. Fable slammed herself into the stool, barely able to curb her temper. “So what’s it like to be a pawn for the Emperor!”

“I brought pleasure to my master through the tears of his subjects.” Momentarily distracted by the sincerity of the

spontaneous soliloquy, Brandl stared into his bowl. Recovering his cynicism, he glared across the small table. "The Emperor's ideas are quite noble. It's his methods which eventually offend those of lesser vision."

"Sounds like you're still loyal to him." Through narrowed eyes, she retaliated. "Why not, he only tried to kill you."

"In time, you will learn that an old friend is very much like a good mirror. The longer you stare into it, the harder it is to find the flaws."

A shrill whine echoed from high above, sending a peculiar reverberation through the theater. Fable felt a chill as her ears recognized the distinct sounds of a shuttle flying overhead. Its exhaust boosters could be heard above the whine of the ion drive, as the pilot circled, looking for an appropriate place to land. "That's Vialco. Isn't it?"

Brandl closed his eyes and was silent. Fable straightened her shoulders as she rose from the table, turning her back on the Jedi. "No more bad dreams," she whispered with firm resolve and stepped from the shadows of the theater into the dawn. Her body knew every hollow and rise in the unmarked trail that led to the picturesque grounds of Kovit's graveyard. She stared across the entrance mound to where Vialco stood among the tarnished graves and markers. For a moment, the fear and horror of their first encounter returned in full force.

"You've matured much faster than I expected," Vialco declared. "I never imagined Lord Brandl to be such a gracious host."

Vialco walked among the raised tombs, brushing his gloved hands over the rough-hewn stone, as if drawing power from the shadows lurking at the site of each grave. His face was gangly and angular, unattractive, with gaunt cheeks and unusually large brows. Sensing her peripheral thoughts, he whispered, "No, no more bad dreams, girl. I've come for the harvest." A sinister determination shadowed his pallid face. "What shall it be, hmm?"

Fable shifted her weight to one foot, cocking her hip arrogantly. As Vialco ignited his lightsaber, she calmly drew her own, assuming the ready stance. She parried his first, preemptive attempts to break through her defenses, losing no ground to him, and met his surprise with a coy smile.

"We are much improved," he commented. "Have I left too much time for you to prepare?"

"Lord Brandl did say you were a coward," Fable taunted. "But I already knew that."

Vialco's face flushed with rage as he began a series of short lunges, forcing Fable to move back along the perimeter of the muddy basin. Feinting to the left, she swung around behind him, delivering a swift kick to Vialco's behind. Enraged by her insolence, Vialco turned on her, gripping the lightsaber tightly in his hands. Deliberately stretching her defenses, he attempted to penetrate her confidence.

"Fable?"

Fable heard the soft-spoken voice from the past, and without turning toward the shadowy image on the edge of her peripheral vision, she knew the illusion to be Arecelis. The image waved and laughed, sounding intimately like her dead friend. "No," Fable whispered, "no, I don't think so, Vialco. I saw what you did to him. I saw it!" she seethed. The tip of her lightsaber sliced easily through the shoulder of his cloak. "And that was your first mistake."

"And my second?"

"Letting me live to remember it!" She lunged savagely at him, knocking Vialco against the tomb of Brandl's wife. Breaking off the assault, she somersaulted back down into the depression. Disengaging her lightsaber, she stood there defiantly. "Shall I play with you like you played with him?"

"Wretched girl!" Vialco hissed, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. "If you will not be turned, you will die!" Summoning the corrupt powers of the dark side, Vialco felt the

energy coursing through him. He extended his arms, curling his fingertips as the first tendrils of lightning surged from his hands.

Fable flinched, awkwardly balanced as she tried to back away. The arc of lightning shot through her, ripping into her flesh. Screaming in pain, she dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal ball as the agony washed through her. Before she could collect herself, a second and third blow left her tortured body temporarily paralyzed.

“Have we come so far to fall so low?” Vialco taunted. “Tsk, ts, what a pity,” he smacked his thin lips.

Reeling with the corrupt power surge, Fable jumped to her feet. As Vialco took aim, she somersaulted, voicing a shrill squeal of effort as the pulse of electricity cuffed her shoulder. Wielding the lightsaber in both hands, she began the subtle movements of the first cadence. As each tendril of lightning arced at her, she swept the blade of the lightsaber across it, effectively deflecting it. She imagined that each arc was a new series of lines. Each point was the metal reflection of a ball bearing, the shiny wick of a candle.

Twenty, thirty ... she lost count of the number of successful deflections. Even as the crescent of lightning arced behind her, slipping in above her head, she simply brought the lightsaber over her shoulder into its path. Never turning to look, her body reacted as her eyes designed the next path.

Fable fought her way to the top of the mound. Knocking Vialco from his feet, she pushed him down into the depression. She watched in horror as the tendrils of lightning rebelled against their master, burning through his clothing and flesh. He lurched for his lightsaber and fumbled, knocking the weapon out of reach. “Have we come so far to lie so low?” Fable mocked. She slid down the face of the mound, raising her lightsaber to finish him.

Vialco cowered below her, writhing in the mud. Something in his groveling manner made Fable hesitate, dropping her arms to chest height, as the lightsaber hummed insistently in her hands.

“Will you give him the chance to betray you again?” Keeping her eyes on Vialco, Fable felt the dark presence of her master. “Kill him and be done with it,” Brandl whispered. “Only then will you know that the nightmare is over.”

Fable disengaged the lightsaber and turned to her Jedi mentor. “It is over. Why kill him?”

“Remember what he is and what he has done. He will betray your dreams, as he has done before, and use them to his advantage. End the nightmare, Fable. Kill him.”

Fable heard the pulse of the lightsaber before she saw it. Wondering how Vialco had gotten hold of his weapon without her sensing it, she whirled, igniting her lightsaber. Vialco arced his blade toward her vulnerable legs. In a wild strike, she severed his head from the shoulders, never losing momentum. But as he fell, she clearly saw his empty hands. The lightsaber was still on the ground, several meters from his body.

“Who’s tricking who?” Fable hissed, enraged by Brandl’s careful deceit. Lunging toward her mentor, she met the abrupt thrust of his lightsaber. Dominating and powerful, he knocked Fable off of her feet and drove her back into the opposite mound. “You lied to me!” she gasped, weakly rubbing her bruised cheek. “What have you done?”

“I have set your place at the Emperor’s table,” Brandl replied. “Soon, I shall again stand at my master’s side and you shall stand beside me.” He glared down at her, mocking the injury in her eyes. “You knew there would be a price.”

“What price?”

Brandl smiled, posing arrogantly for his small audience. Offering his hand, he whispered, “Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including Jaalib’s affections. There’s no use fighting it, Fable. Accept and you will be well cared for, this I promise you.” Brandl turned to leave. “Don’t bother running to your ship. Thermal detonators are rather effective tools.” Gently caressing the scars at his temple, he chuckled, “I should know.”



Locked in her room, Fable rocked quietly from side to side, wiping tears on her sleeve. Her fingers were blood-covered and black with grime, the nails shredded from a recent tantrum at the site of her X-wing. In an attempt to avoid her impending fate, she had fled to the vessel and found the gutted remains of her starfighter in a blackened blast diameter. Only the central frame of the X-wing had survived the initial blast. Vialco's shuttle was also consumed by the explosion, strewn across a sunken depression of scorched earth. Cursing Brandl, she rocked faster and harder, desperate to find some way to escape him.

The door opened slowly, a small crack that grew larger as the hunched figure skulked into the room. Fable's eyes brightened immediately, recognizing the face. "Jaalib," she whispered, swept into his arms. "Your father's—"

"Shh, I know," he hushed. Sitting down on the bed beside her, he gently pulled her trembling body against him. "I just happened to go over my ship's backup logs and discovered my father's side trip to Byss."

"Byss?"

"The Emperor's pleasure world. I hurried back as soon as I could and found what was left of your X-wing. Wasn't hard to figure out the next scene." He picked up a small satchel of her things and threw it over his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"You're leaving," he replied curtly. "Don't talk. Don't think. Don't even breathe heavy or he'll find us."

"He'll know eventually, as soon as we step outside this theater."

"And that doesn't give us much time," he argued. "So just run."

Following the trail out of the settlement, Jaalib jogged toward the mountain range, using the jutting lip of the Khoehng Heights as a guide beneath the moonlit skies of Trulalis. Fable matched his earnest strides and together they ran the short kilometer to the wheat field, where a familiar ship was waiting for them.

"The *Prodigal*!" she screamed. "Deke!"

"Heard you got yourself in a spot of trouble," the Socorran grumbled with relief. "Didn't think I'd let you go down alone, did you?" Hearing a proximity alarm from within the ship, Deke nodded to Jaalib. "I set the sensors just like you said." He eyed his ship dubiously. "Something or somebody just tripped the perimeter sensor."

"It's him," Fable trembled, casting her gaze to the far-off theater steeple.

"Then you had better go," Jaalib whispered.

"What about you?" Fable protested. "Come with us."

"He's my father, Fable. It's not that easy."

"And you call this easy?" she croaked, tears in her voice. Seeing the denial in his eyes, Fable pleaded, "Jaalib—"

Cutting off her objections with a kiss, Jaalib gently crowded her toward the ship. "For once in your life, listen, and go before he gets here."

"But—"

"No, Fable!" Jaalib hissed. "You're nothing but a consolation prize to the Emperor!"

"He's right, Capt'n," Deke insisted. "Time to bail."

Desperately appealing to her defiant eyes, Jaalib grinned, anxious to subdue her temper. "I was born to play this role, remember? I am the Edjian-Prince." Swallowing his sorrow, he embraced her warmly. "It's the last act, Fable. I have to burn the forest down now."

"Then burn it," she sobbed, cradling her head against his shoulder.

"I can't. Not while you're still here."

Fable stumbled up the ramp and cued the hatch controls. Leaning heavily on the secured door, she wiped absently at a tear, sensing the warmth of Jaalib's touch on her cheek.

Shielding his eyes from the freighter's exhaust, Jaalib stepped back into the swaying fields of wheat. Engines glowing red with the strain of sudden acceleration, the *Prodigal* banked sharply

against the foot of the mountains, carrying Fable away. Lightning signaled her departure, bringing on a deluge of cold, cold rain. Jaalib took a deep breath, bracing himself for the wrath of the brooding presence slowly moving up behind him.

Brandl briefly glanced up, searching for some signs of Fable—his squandered prize. There were none and his austere gaze fell heavily on Jaalib. “Arrogant, deceitful child,” he snarled.

Feeling the subtle constriction of his throat, Jaalib resisted panic as his windpipe contracted, seized by invisible fingers. “No less arrogant than my father,” he rasped. Desperate for air, he dropped to his knees, slowly losing consciousness as the grip tightened about his throat. His father abruptly released him and the cool, damp air flowed into his body.

Staring after the retreating figure of his father, Jaalib staggered precariously. Compelled to follow, he screamed, “Long ... live ... the king!”

# **The Last Hand**

## **by Paul Danner**

Sabacc!”

Doune’s resounding laughter echoed through the gambling hall, the Herglic’s huge body shaking with the effort. “You lose again, boy.”

Vee-Six, Doune’s droid, quickly calculated his master’s winnings and enthusiastically reported the total for all to hear.

The gathered crowd cheered as the Herglic claimed the pot, leaving Nyo with a single credit to his name.

The young man lowered his head in disbelief, fighting back tears. *How could I have been so stupid?* Nyo thought as he stared at the lone cred chip that constituted all the money he had in the galaxy. Now, all hope was gone.

“Doune ... the great gambler. Able to steal the money from a poor farmboy with ease. I suppose you are equally skilled at firing your heavy blaster on unarmed opponents.”

The bold words silenced the room.

The Herglic looked up in shock, searching the sycophantic circle of admirers who always clung to winners for the dissonant voice.

The spectators parted for the cloaked figure as if he were a thermal detonator. A large hood kept the stranger's face in shadow, but the dark visage was obviously focused on the Herglic.

"You think you could do better, friend?" Doune asked, a dangerous edge in his deep voice.

The figure gestured to the crowd. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of all your ... friends."

"I never turn away anyone so obviously willing to lose his money to me," Doune chuckled. "Sit down."

The stranger paused for a moment, then slid into the empty seat. "Very well. I must warn you, though ..."

The Herglic cocked an eyebrow. "Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess." Doune gestured dramatically. "You're the greatest gambler who ever lived, right?"

"Actually, I was just going to say that I don't have any money on me, but now that you mention it ..." The stranger lowered his hood, eliciting a collective gasp from the spectators. "I am."

The stranger's close-cropped hair was white, though streaks of silver snaked their way through the ivory. His eyes were pale violet, like tropical flowers that had withered and lost their luster. A jagged scar wound its way around his lip, cutting an unnatural line up past his nose. With stony features reminiscent of a royal statue, the man was undeniably handsome; however, that wasn't the reason for the crowd's reaction.

The whispers had begun, and the buzzing made it seem as if a colony of insects had descended upon the room. Throughout the snatches of conversation in the multitude of languages, two words were repeated with frightening frequency.

*Kinnin Vo-Shay.*

Doune's thick flesh had begun to mottle, a sure sign the Herglic was agitated.

"This is nothing but a trick, Master." Vee-Six leaned forward, eyes flashing as his databanks began recalling information. "The *Ashanda Ray* was reported lost in the Tyus cluster half a century ago. If Kinnin Vo-Shay had survived, which is highly unlikely, he would be well over one hundred standard years old. The man was lucky, but he was no Jedi."

"It would seem you are not who you appear to be, after all." Doune seemed to calm down a bit, his usual predatory smirk returning to his face. "I must admit, though, the resemblance is uncanny. You must have paid a fortune on cosmetic alterations. No wonder you've broke."

A nervous chuckle escaped the crowd.

"For such a renowned gambler, Doune, you've a much faster dealer of opinions than cards." The stranger leveled his piercing gaze. "Perhaps you win by talking until your opponents die of sheer boredom."

"The one thing I never deal in is charity," the Herglic said, a note of irritation creeping into his voice. "Until you ante up, there will be no game."

That drew a mixed reaction from the crowd. Many wanted to see if the stranger really was telling the truth, and there was only one way to decide that...

"But, Doune, what if he really is Vo-Shay?" one brave soul asked.

The Herglic had had enough, and his blubber shook with fury. "I don't care if he's Jabba the Hutt. Without money, he doesn't play!"

A single credit spun through the air, shimmering in the dim glowlights. Without blinking, Vo-Shay plucked the cred from its flight with practiced ease. He slowly turned to face his surprise benefactor.

Nyo started to say something, but Vo-Shay offered a wink that was so quick the young man was scarcely sure he saw it at all.

"From one loser to another ... how appropriate. Are you ready, then?" Doune demanded.

Vo-Shay's face lost all expression, resembling a droid that had been abruptly powered down. Those strange eyes took on a faraway look, as if they were staring into eternity. He spoke only a single word, but it sent a chill down the spine of every being present who had one.

"Deal," Vo-Shay said.

The room grew deathly quiet.

And the game began....

Doune slid a blubbery fin across his forehead, which was glistening with perspiration. The Herglic examined his cards and grunted softly. His pile of credits was steadily decreasing, while Vo-Shay's lone credit had gained thousands of friends in less than an hour. He glanced up at his opponent, but the human gambler's face may as well have been carved out of ferrostone.

Only Vo-Shay's right hand was in motion, absently twirling the obsidian stone pendant hanging from his neck. When he had first removed the bauble from underneath his shirt, a collective gasp resounded from the crowd. The necklace that was rumored to be the source of the legendary gambler's astonishing luck. It was yet another piece of evidence that suggested that this man was really who he claimed to be.

The Herglic watched his shifting sabacc cards and nearly grinned. The Four of Coins had reformed into the Mistress of Staves, with a value of thirteen. He already held the Nine of Staves. Doune dramatically pushed the metallic cards into the neutral stabilizer field. "Twenty-two."

Vo-Shay began laying out his cards. The Ace of Flasks, the Master of Flasks, and the Nine of Flasks. A total of thirty-eight. A low murmur rippled through the crowd. Nyo winced and looked away. The gambler was about to go bust.

Chuckling, the Herglic reached for the pot ... fifteen thousand credits.

Vo-Shay played one more card into the neutral field. The Evil One. Negative fifteen. That brought his hand down to twenty-three. "Sabacc," he said, grabbing Donne's hand just as it reached the thick stack of credits at the center of the table. "I believe that's mine."

The Herglic snarled. "Your luck cannot last forever, impostor."

But it did.

In another hour, Vo-Shay held over one hundred thousand credits. The crowd not only began to believe, they had completely shifted allegiance. Vee-Six was the lone supporter remaining in Donne's corner, and the droid was not exactly encouraging. "Please, Master," Vee-Six implored, "you must end this before—"

"Shut up!" the Herglic roared, shoving the droid away. He slammed a cred stick onto the table. "One more, human ... double or nothing."

"Don't risk it," Nyo whispered, eyeing Vo-Shay's winnings. "Let's just cut and run."

The gambler smiled, his pale violet pupils dilated with excitement. "I never back down from a challenge." He eyed his opponent. "Ready?"

Donne nodded, nostrils flaring.

The gambler spun the obsidian pendant on its chain, and the stone danced as if it were alive. More than one observer found himself transfixed by the sight as Vo-Shay reached for his cards....

Nyo and Vo-Shay walked out of the gambling hall with nearly a quarter of a million credits.

The young man was so excited, he couldn't stop talking. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it."

"Well, Donne actually played the game and I'm betting he still isn't sure what happened." The gambler patted the youth on the



back and handed him the small electronic stick containing two hundred thousand credits. "All yours, my boy. I kept the change for expenses ... hope you don't mind."

"Are you kidding?" Nyo's hand was shaking as he held the cred stick. "I can't thank you enough for this ... you've literally made my dreams come true."

"That's a lot of money you've got there." Vo-Shay studied the young man. "You obviously don't frequent places like that, so I'm assuming you were trying to win for a reason."

Nyo glanced off into the distance, shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

"Sorry ... I have a bad habit of sticking my nose in where it's not welcome. Curiosity is just one of my many vices, but it gets me in trouble more than any of the others." The gambler squeezed Nyo's shoulder. "Whatever it is, I hope it works out for you."

Vo-Shay pulled up the hood of his cloak and effortlessly slid into the crowd.

"Wait!" The gambler turned, just as the youth caught up. "If you hadn't been nosy back there, I'd be walking home with one credit in my pocket ... can we talk?" Nyo glanced around the bustling street. "In private?"

Vo-Shay shook his head and laughed. "Now you've gone and done it. I never could pass up a good confidential chat." The gambler gestured to a dingy cantina in the distance. "After you..."

The duo sat at a booth in the rear of the cantina, with a bottle of Corellian whisky and a good deal of space between themselves and the next patrons. Vo-Shay blended in so well with the shadows that it seemed as if Nyo was sitting alone at the table.

The gambler downed another shot of the tangy drink and stared at his companion. "Well, have you imbibed enough liquid courage, yet? Or am I going to be sitting here all night?"

Nyo chuckled, then grew serious. "Are you really Kinnin Vo-Shay?"

"Last I heard."

"Then how is it that you're—"

The gambler held up a gloved hand. "I thought we were here because you wanted to reveal your secrets...."

"Point taken." The young man took a drink and then a deep breath. "The reason I need the money is—promise not to laugh?"

"I never make promises, son. I only deal in cards. Not words."

Nyo didn't respond. He was staring into his glass, as if mesmerized by the smooth contours. After a few more moments of silence, he finally spoke. His voice was a whisper. "I want to buy a lightsaber."

The gambler's eyes widened. "Really?"

"You think it's stupid."

"No! That's just the last thing I expected to hear. I figured it was something more mundane ... a sick family member in need of an expensive operation, a beautiful girl you couldn't afford to marry, maybe a debt to a nefarious crime lord."

Nyo shook his head. "No, nothing like that."

"So where do you intend to pick one up? They're not exactly standard stock for equipment shops, you know."

"I've heard about a black-market dealer who has one for sale."

"Where?"

Nyo was obviously reluctant to answer.

"Come on, son," the gambler said, reaching for his glass, "it's not as if I'm going to race there ahead of you and snatch it up...."

"Nar Shaddaa."

Vo-Shay nearly spat out his drink. "The Smuggler's Moon!" The gambler narrowed his eyes and gave the young man an appraising glance. "Just how old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty standard years," he said proudly.

“And you’ve lived here on Morado all your life. Have you ever been offworld before?”

“Well, no ... but I’ve seen plenty of holos—”

Vo-Shay burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Nyo said, obviously annoyed.

“Nothing! What could possibly be funny about a boy who’s never been off his home planet traveling by himself to one of the most dangerous hives of scum and villainy in the galaxy with two hundred thousand credits on him to purchase an illegal weapon from a shady black-market dealer?” He leaned forward. “Are you even carrying a blaster?”

The young man’s silence answered his question.

The gambler wiped tears from his eyes. “By the Force ... you must be either an overconfident fool or a half-wit. Your star may be fiery, but it isn’t going to burn long in this galaxy if you keep up this sort of behavior.”

Nyo abruptly stood, slamming his fist against the table. “I don’t need a lecture! Especially not from somebody who’s supposed to be dead because he was too lazy to pilot his ship around an extremely dangerous area of space ...” The young man started to leave, but wasn’t through yet. “And you may be the greatest gambler who ever lived, but you have a lot to learn about dealing with people. See you around.” With that, Nyo promptly stormed out of the cantina.

*You never change, do you, Shay? The* disembodied voice was hauntingly beautiful, caressing the gambler’s cheek like a cool breeze.

“Listen,” Vo-Shay took a final swig directly from the whisky bottle and walked to the door, “if you want to put your two credits in, just leave them on the table ... I don’t have change for a tip.”

“So, how much for passage to Nar Shaddaa?”

The Barabel captain quickly calculated his figure, then grinned at Nyo. With all those sharp teeth, it wasn't a comforting sight. "Twenty-five thousand. Paid in advance. No refund under any circumstances ..."

The young man stumbled over his words. "I ... I don't know. That seems like an awful lot."

"That's because it is."

Both the Barabel and Nyo looked up at the new voice. Vo-Shay stood at their table, arms folded across his chest. "The boy could get a better deal from a Jawa ... and on something far nicer than the garbage scow you're passing off as a tramp freighter."

Enraged, the captain stood, towering over the gambler. "You insult me...."

"No. You insult *him*," Vo-Shay said, indicating Nyo. "And if you want to live to prey on another easy mark, I suggest you leave immediately. Or else you'll be insulting *me*."

Barabels, however, are not easily intimidated. "And why should I care about that, little man?"

Vo-Shay shifted his position slightly, flashing the two hold-out blasters he held tucked under arms.

The captain snorted and took a threatening step forward, "I could make you eat those."

"If you *were* that good, you'd have already done it instead of just talking about it," the gambler said, refusing to give up a centimeter of ground. "Now go; find some nerfs to herd."

The Barabel shoved past Vo-Shay and slipped into the crowd milling around the bar.

Still chuckling, the gambler slipped the blasters into his cloak and dropped into the vacated seat.

"What do you want now?" the young man asked.

"Just to talk."

Nyo started to get up. "I don't have anything else to say to you."

Vo-Shay reached out and quickly yanked him back into his seat.

“Hey! Lemme go ...”

“Not until you’ve heard my offer.”

“What kind of offer?”

“I’ll fly you to Nar Shaddaa.”

Nyo couldn’t believe it. “Why would you do that?”

“To make sure you get there without dying,” the gambler said, rocking back in his chair. “And so you can pay me ten thousand credits.”

It didn’t take him long to consider the offer. “Deal,” Nyo said, smiling.

“Let’s get going, then.”

The young man was already headed for the door, giddy with excitement. “I can’t believe this....”

Vo-Shay shook his head as he followed Nyo out. “Join the club,” he said softly.

“There she is.” The gambler’s voice was filled with the pride only a parent or ship captain could ever know.

Nyo stepped into Docking Bay 49 and his mouth promptly fell open. “The *Ashanda Ray* ...”

The two men circled the graceful curves of the light freighter. Vo-Shay carefully slid a hand along her smooth underbelly. “She was designed by a good friend of mine ... a Mon Cal engineer with a great eye.”

Like most ships designed by the Mon Calamari, the *Ray* was a model of efficiency, structural strength, and aesthetic appeal. More than a spacecraft, it resembled a handcrafted piece of art. With myriad pods, bulges, and bumps, the ship almost appeared organic rather than constructed—like a great ocean-dwelling creature.

“She can be a headache for maintenance and repair, but other than that ...”

"Quite a beauty," Nyo agreed, "but I don't see any weapons ... or sensors. Or anything."

"What would an exotic woman be without her secrets?" The gambler laid an arm around the young man's shoulders. "Now come on ... let's go get your lightsaber."

Exhausted from his exploits, Nyo spent most of the trip in one of the *Ray's* extremely comfortable bunks.

Vo-Shay was resting in the cockpit, half asleep himself. The ship would warn him if anything came up, and the smoothly accelerating starlines of lightspeed always made the gambler drowsy. When he heard the lilting voice, he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not.

*You definitely have your moments.*

His eyes popped open. Definitely not dreaming ...

"Was there ever any doubt in your mind?"

*Do you want me to be honest, or nice?*

"Nice," Vo-Shay grinned. "So, what's the word?"

*It's hard to say right now. I need more time.*

"Don't we all."

*He's coming.*

Vo-Shay craned his neck up over the top of the chair. "Well, well. Look what the gundark dragged in...."

Nyo entered the cockpit, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He unceremoniously plopped down into the copilot's seat. "Are we there yet?"

The gambler checked his displays. "Almost. You get some rest?"

The young man nodded, surveying the cockpit.

"Good." Vo-Shay leaned back in his chair, absently twirling his pendant. "You'll need to keep your eyes wide open in a place like Nar Shaddaa. Bad things can happen to people faster than you can even think about pulling your blaster."

"That's okay," Nyo answered with a grin. "I don't have one, remember?"

The gambler chuckled. After a few moments, he grew serious and turned to face Nyo. "You never told me why you wanted a lightsaber."

"You never told me how you survived your untimely demise in the Tyus cluster," the young man countered evenly, "or how come you're not over a hundred years old."

"An even exchange, huh? Okay, but I asked first."

The gambler immediately recognized that distant look that crept into Nyo's eyes. It was the one that always prefaced the resurfacing of a lifelong dream and usually culminated in trouble.

"I want to become a Jedi Knight," the young man said in a voice just above a whisper.

The gambler was silent for a moment. "I thought they built their own lightsabers when they were actually ready to wield one...."

That seemed to deflate Nyo slightly, but he quickly recovered. "I just wanted to have something ... connected with them. I mean, it's not like there's anyone around to train me. I don't know...." He stared out the viewport, at the stars rushing past. "I guess I thought that if I felt a lightsaber in my hands, there'd be some kind of magic, you know? You have to take your first step somewhere, and this was the only path I could find."

*Well spoken, young one.*

"Huh?" Nyo snapped out of his reverie and glanced back at Vo-Shay. "Did you say something?"

"Wasn't me," the gambler said with a wink.

"So, I held up my end of the bargain ... now, let's hear your story."

Something caught Vo-Shay's eye. "It'll have to wait."

"Why?"

The gambler's hands were already dancing over the controls, abruptly dropping the *Ray* out of hyperspace. "Because we've got company...."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vo-Shay tracked the three incoming ships on the *Ray*'s sensors.

"Who is it?"

"They haven't introduced themselves yet, but somehow I don't think it's a welcoming committee." The gambler eyed the display and frowned. "One Ghtroc freighter and two Z-95 Headhunters. Could be worse, I guess...."

"How? We're already outnumbered."

"But never outclassed." The comlink sounded its shrill call, drawing Vo-Shay's attention "It sounds as if they want to talk. That's always a good sign."

"This is Captain Yarrku of the *Night Raider*...." came the filtered voice.

"He sounds familiar," Nyo said.

Vo-Shay grunted. "It's that Barabel from the cantina."

"Are you sure?"

"I never forget a voice."

"What could he possibly want?"

"Only one way to find out," the gambler said, then engaged the comlink. "Is there a problem, Captain?"

"There will be unless you hand over all the credits you stole from Doune."

"Stole? From Doune? Hah! That blubberpot Herg must be going senile.... I won that money fair and square at a sabacc game."

"Doune does not share your view of the situation. He believes you cheated him, and he has hired us to retrieve his money. If you hand it over, there will be no damage to you or your ship. Otherwise ..." The Barabel's voice trailed off ominously.

"Doune is nothing but a poor loser. And as far as I'm concerned, he's going to stay that way."

"You know, I was hoping you'd say that," Yarrku said with an unfriendly chuckle. Then there was only static.



The two Z-95s broke off into standard flanking formation as frighteningly powerful laser bolts erupted from the Ghtroc freighter.

Vo-Shay executed a quick barrel roll and then pointed the *Ray*'s nose into a power dive. The two bolts screamed past, cutting through the space that the ship had occupied microseconds before.

Nyo couldn't believe it. "That thing's got a pair of quad lasers!"

"So much for talking," Vo-Shay grumbled as he swung the *Ray* around to face an oncoming Headhunter.

"This ship *does* have weapons, right?" Nyo asked.

The gambler merely grinned and touched one of the control screens.

One of the pods on the *Ray*'s belly spiraled open, revealing a large triple-barreled laser cannon. The turret swung around, locking onto the approaching Headhunter.

A thunderous volley of laser bolts tracked the Z-95 as it tried to execute an evasive turn. The blasts "walked" right up the ship's exposed starboard side, shredding the shields, and finally exploding the ship's wing.

Without the starboard stabilizers, the Headhunter began to spin out of control, harmlessly veering off into the distance.

"Does that answer your question?" the gambler asked with a smug grin.

His smile faded when one of the *Night Raider*'s quad laser bolts slammed into the *Ray*'s port side. The impact spun the light freighter around sharply and Vo-Shay found himself fighting to keep her steady.

The other Headhunter was closing in, with all blasters blazing away mercilessly.

Unable to evade the attack, the *Ray* was forced to take a considerable pounding from the Z-95's strafing run.

The ship bucked and shook under the assault, knocking the two men around in their chairs. The gambler cursed under his breath as he steadied his wounded craft.

"We just lost half our shields!" Nyo cried out in alarm.

Acting as if he didn't hear, an enraged Vo-Shay brought the *Ray* into a hard bootlegger's turn that sent a structural groan through the ship. He closed the distance with impossible speed. Nyo felt as if a giant invisible hand was pressing against his chest. "I didn't know freighters could move this fast."

"Most can't. This one can."

Thanks to Vo-Shay's expert piloting, the *Ray* mirrored every last maneuver the Headhunter executed. It was as if the two pilots were of one mind. No matter what tactic it tried, the Z-95 could not shake off the larger ship. A sustained burst of heavy blaster fire quickly turned the Headhunter into a flaming starburst.

"Gotcha!" Vo-Shay shouted.

"And I got you," came Yarrku's filtered voice over the comlink. It was followed by another bone-jarring impact as another quad laser blast found its mark.

"Shields are gone," Nyo cried out in alarm. "And the hyperdrive's been damaged."

The gambler quietly brought the *Ray* around to face the *Night Raider*. The big Ghtroc freighter hung there in space, waiting, with its big quad lasers brought to bear. The two idle ships looked like gunfighters, each one waiting for the other to draw....

Yarrku's voice broke the silence. "Your shields are gone. Another hit from my weapons and you'll be nothing but debris. Do the sensible thing and hand over the money. Before it's too late."

"So we give you the credits and you'll leave us alone?" Vo-Shay asked.

"You have my word."

*He's lying.*

Vo-Shay and Nyo spoke at the same time. "I know." The two men exchanged a quick look, though Nyo seemed more than a bit bewildered.

The gambler keyed the comlink. "Deal. I'll put the credit chip in a probe and launch it over."

"Minimal contact, minimal need for trust. Yes, that would be satisfactory. However, any tricks and I'll blow you to microns."

Vo-Shay shut off the comlink and reached for the controls.

"We're not really going to give it to him, are we?" asked a flustered Nyo.

The gambler grinned. "Oh, we're going to give it to him, all right."

Three of the small forward pods on the *Ray* slid away to reveal darkened launch tubes.

"All yours," Vo-Shay said over the comm as he punched the control panel.

A trio of proton torpedoes simultaneously screamed out of the *Ray's* tubes, streaking toward the *Night Raider*.

In response, the *Ghtroc* opened up with both quad lasers.

Nyo shut his eyes.

The quad laser bolts reached the *Ray*, and impacted ... against the ship's shields.

"Nooo!" That was the final transmission from the *Night Raider*, before the torpedoes converged and turned the ship into a giant, blossoming fireball.

The young man slowly looked around, utterly amazed to be alive.

Vo-Shay flashed a grin.

"But ... our shields were gone," Nyo said in disbelief.

"One of the miracles of Mon Cal engineering, son. Redundant shield systems. Of course, half-witted opponents don't hurt, either." The gambler took the controls and engaged the sublight engines. "Nar Shaddaa, here we come...."

“I don’t have it,” the dealer said. “How many other ways can I say it?”

“What do you mean you don’t have it?” Nyo repeated for the fourth time.

Vo-Shay arched an eyebrow, leaning on the counter. “I think my associate is just curious as to the reason why you no longer have the lightsaber.”

The chubby businessman grinned, bearing diamond-white teeth. “Because I already sold it.”

“But I put down a deposit so you wouldn’t.”

“What can I say?” the man said simply. “A better offer came along.”

Nyo looked just about ready to kill the fat merchant. Vo-Shay was suddenly glad the kid was unarmed.

“Well, who did you sell it to?” the young man demanded.

“Sorry. That’s privileged information.”

Nyo swept a hand across the bare warehouse that served as the dealer’s shop. It was currently empty except for the three of them. “There’s no one else here. Maybe I can cut a deal with the buyer. I swear I won’t say a word.”

“It’s not going to be too hard to figure out who gave you the information.” The dealer shook his head. “Can’t do it. Now, if there’s something else you’d be interested in ...”

Nyo seemed to be on the brink of exploding at the man, but thought better of it. He spun around and stormed out of the shop. The gambler shrugged and followed him out.

“Sorry, kid,” Vo-Shay said as they boarded the *Ray*. He squeezed Nyo’s shoulder. “The galaxy can be a cruel place sometimes.”

“I know,” the young man said softly, “it’s just that I wanted that saber so much.”

“Well, you never know—” The gambler’s voice abruptly trailed off as he saw the flashing light on the display.

“What is it?”

“A message ...” Vo-Shay tapped the control.

A holo-recording crackled into the air, taking the shape of a certain Herglic gambler.

“Doune.” The word tumbled from the gambler’s lips like a curse.

“Greetings, farmboy. And to you as well, O legendary one. It seems as though the attempt to recoup my losses failed miserably. Ah, well ... life can be surprising, can it not?” The Herglic held up a long, silver haft and smiled.

Nyo’s eyes had grown to the size of thermal detonators threatening to explode.

“As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, it was I who purchased this elegant little weapon you so craved. And I would not be loathe to part with it—under certain circumstances.”

“Come on, get to the point, you bloated bag of wind,” Vo-Shay mumbled.

“What I am proposing is simple. One last hand of sabacc between myself and Vo-Shay. If the gambler wins, you can have the lightsaber. If I win, I get the source of the gambler’s uncanny luck—the obsidian necklace. If you accept, meet me at the Nygann Cantina three hours from now....” The holographic image faded.

Nyo and Vo-Shay exchanged a look.

“You’ve done so much for me already,” the young man began. “I would never ask you to do this—especially if it means you could lose your necklace.”

“I won’t. Lose, that is ...” The gambler grinned. “Besides, I told you ... I never could resist a challenge.”

Doune and Vo-Shay faced off once again, this time in a private gambling room at the back of the cantina. The only other beings present were the dealer droid, Nyo and Donne’s droid, Vee-Six.

“One last hand decides it all, correct?” asked the Herglic.

The gambler nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off his opponent.

The dealer droid sent five sabacc cards to each player, then obediently waited for the two men to look over the hands they'd been dealt.

"Sabacc!" With a thunderous laugh, the Herglic abruptly shoved his cards into the interference field and glowered in triumph. "Beat that?"

Nyo paled as he glanced at Vo-Shay, who was nervously twirling his pendant.

The gambler looked up from his cards and slowly inserted them into the field. First was the Idiot card. Then came the Two of Sabers. A three of any suit would give Vo-Shay an Idiot's Array.

And a winning hand.

The Herglic took in a sharp breath, his skin mottling furiously....

The gambler fingered one of his remaining cards, then slipped it into the field. For a moment, his hand covered the surface, then finally moved clear.

The Five of Staves. For a total of eight.

Vo-Shay had lost.

Nyo blinked once, then his mouth fell open. He tried to meet the gambler's eyes, but Vo-Shay had turned away as if he had found something incredibly interesting on the floor.

The Herglic roared his approval and then extended a flipper. "I believe you have something that now belongs to me...."

Vo-Shay carefully slipped the obsidian pendant from his neck and handed it over without a word.

Ecstatic, the Herglic snatched it up. "So, the unbeatable one has fallen at last. With this, I will be unstoppable." He grinned at Nyo. "Congratulations, boy ... you have just witnessed the death of an old legend and the birth of a new one." Doune got to his feet and started for the door, Vee-Six trailing behind him. The Herglic paused at the door, and almost as an afterthought, tossed

the lightsaber onto the table. The weapon scattered the sabacc cards. "Here! It's not as though I need it..." With a final terrible chuckle, the Herglic and his droid left.

Nyo stared first at the saber, then at Vo-Shay. "I ... I don't know what to say..."

The gambler looked up, brandishing a wide smile. "Well, you could start with 'thank you.' " He flipped over one of the sabacc cards he hadn't played....

The Three of Sabers.

The young man was stunned. "You had the Idiot's Array! You won!" Then it hit him. "But why didn't you play it?"

"First of all, considering how badly Doune reacted to my winning his money in the first place, do you really think he would have let us just waltz out of here with the lightsaber even if I did win it fair and square? Plus, I counted at least a half-dozen mercs nursing glasses of lum on our way in here. My guess is that all they were waiting for was Donne's order."

"I see your point, I guess. But you didn't have to sacrifice your pendant!"

"Listen, kid ... that particular bauble was given to me a long time ago by a tenacious old girlfriend who wanted more of a relationship than I was ready for at the time. This girl refused to give up, no matter what I said or did. The only reason I considered it lucky was because the day she gave it to me, we finally broke up. I kept the thing and discovered that when I played with it during a game, it did a wonderful job of distracting my opponents. So you see, it really has no mystical power. I make my own luck. As do we all..."

A smile crept onto Nyo's lips. "Donne's in for quite a surprise, then."

"Exactly why we should get going," Vo-Shay said, tossing him the lightsaber.

Nyo caught it easily and couldn't believe he was holding the one thing he had dreamed about for so long. He turned the haft over in his hands, caressing the smooth lines and imagining

himself swinging that beautiful bright blade through a graceful arc....

Vo-Shay abruptly reached back inside the room and yanked the starstruck young man after him.

Nyo awoke to a soft, humming sound. It varied in pitch almost constantly, and for a moment, he thought some sort of insect had crawled into his head during his nap. He was momentarily disoriented, but slowly recalled being on the *Ashanda Ray*, headed away from Nar Shaddaa.

Far away.

Then he saw the odd glow reflected on the ship's bulkhead. Quietly making his way back to the passenger compartment, Nyo peeked around the corner.

Vo-Shay stood in the Ray's lounging area, deftly swinging the bright orange energy blade through a series of amazing thrusts and parries. After a few moments, the gambler sensed he was being watched and powered down the saber. He turned to Nyo, extending the weapon handle-first to the young man. "I hope you don't mind. I just couldn't resist."

"How do you know how to do that?" Nyo demanded. Then the young man suddenly grinned. "And can you teach me?"

The gambler plopped down onto one of the lounge chairs. "I guess I still owe you my story, right?"

The young man nodded, taking the seat opposite Vo-Shay's.

"Well, the legends surrounding my disappearance were correct. The *Ray* was indeed caught in the Tyus cluster, and at the center of that mass of ugly black holes, time was nonexistent. Many others had been trapped there before me, though none had survived. Except for one ... a Jedi Master. She helped me escape, and even taught me a little about the Force."

"That's a pretty short summary...."



"I'll save the whole story for another day," Vo-Shay said dismissively. "After all, we'll have plenty of time together when you sign on as my first mate."

"Do you mean it?"

"I never say what I don't mean, kid. Welcome aboard."

"So, you'll teach me about the Force?"

"Me? No ... I'll teach you how not to lose everything to a Herglic at the sabacc table. *She'll* instruct you in the mysterious ways of the Force."

Nyo looked around, not understanding, until a shimmering blue figure appeared next to Vo-Shay. Even dressed in simple robes, the woman's beauty was not lost.

"This is Aryzah," Vo-Shay said by way of introduction, "the lovely Jedi Master who saved my life."

*Greetings, Nyo. May the Force be with you.*

"And just between the two of us, kid," Vo-Shay said with a wink, "you're gonna need it."

# Simple Tricks

## by Chris Cassidy and Tish Pahl

Well, Cap'n," the port mechanic drawled, running a filthy rag between his blackened hands. "You've done quite a number on your ship here."

"I didn't do anything to my ship!" Fen Nabon barked. "A power flux ripped us out of hyperspace! It fried the drive, cooked the backup, and melted the stabilizers and motivator on its way out!"

Fen knew she should have patched the hyperdrive together with spit and engine tape and coaxed the *Star Lady* into Nad'Ris City, Prishardia's planetary capital. But the planet guide glibly guaranteed a "standard-class starport with all amenities" in Lesvol, Prishardia's second-largest city. On landing in the agricultural backwater, Fen realized she was more likely to find the promised "excellent accommodations and dining opportunities" in the molten core of Hoth.

The pasture of some smelly, indeterminate ruminant ringed the spaceport. More ominous, Fen noted, were the rusted

swoops and ancient, gutted freighters which littered the cramped landing pad. She doubted anything in the port had operated under its own power in the last sixteen years. And the greaseball now droning on was likely personally responsible for the disrepair.

“Gibb,” as the name stitched on his coveralls proclaimed him, paused to spit expressively onto the baked dirt, wisely missing the *Lady*’s extended ramp, then withdrew a datapad from a grimy pocket. “This is the inventory of replacement drives we can get, from here or from Nad’Ris.”

As she reviewed the meager list, Fen realized why she had to pry the pad out of Gibb’s shaking hands. There was a very old, very overpriced Horizon-Hopper. The SoroSuub would entail a repair even Fen wouldn’t attempt. Several new Lifesaver 1000s were also handy, death wish included free of charge. There wasn’t even a quick-and-dirty substitute that was safe enough and cheap enough to get her to a decent shipyard.

The bulge in the little man’s throat rose and fell. “We don’t have anything else,” he choked.

Fen shoved the pad back at him. Space, there wasn’t even anything worth stealing. “How long?” she growled.

“We can order an Avatar,” Gibb stammered.

“How long?” Fen repeated, a little closer and a lot louder.

“Corellia is a long way, even at ...”

“How long?” Fen was so close she could smell the chew that hung on him.

Gibb whispered, “A month, maybe two.”

“One month,” Fen ordered.

“Yes, Cap’n,” Gibb squeaked before rushing off.

“Fen, you should teach diplomacy,” a cultured voice scolded. Ghitsa Dogder emerged from the shadows of the *Star Lady*’s ramp.

“I didn’t hear you offering to help,” Fen retorted.

“Why would you need a con artist when your intimidation and yelling were so very effective?” Brandishing a datapad, Ghitsa

continued. "I decided to read about our temporary home instead."

"The rube who wrote that backgrounder is a dead man," Fen gritted. "I'm gonna get a drink in the ship. You coming?"

"No, I think I will investigate for a little while."

Fen shrugged and headed up the *Lady's* ramp. At the hatch she turned back to say something, but her partner had already disappeared into the decaying spaceport building.

Ghitsa's ambiguous statement set off a muted alarm in Fen's head. It wasn't as if she was worried about her partner's safety. Even in an unfamiliar place the con always took care of herself. No, the real big worry was that Ghitsa's sharp eye had probably spied something in the backgrounder on Lesvol. Something Fen missed.

"Sith," Fen muttered, scraping some of the pasture from her boot tread. Digging her fists into her pockets, she went in search of the bottle of Corellian Reserve she kept for really bad days. Whatever the crisis, Corellia had the cure.

Fen was into her third drink, cursing fates and the universe, when her partner finally returned carrying a fist-sized, bright orange fruit.

As Ghitsa set it down on the table, Fen eyed the fruit suspiciously. There were several explanations, each worse than the last. "I don't suppose you picked that up for a snack?"

"Of course not, Fen," Ghitsa sniffed haughtily.

"That's right. You haven't had a nonliquid meal since the Battle of Endor," Fen called as Ghitsa retreated toward her cabin. Against her better judgment, Fen climbed slowly to her feet and followed.

"Ghits, what are you up to?" Fen asked as she leaned against the open hatch to Ghitsa's quarters, nursing her drink.

"Just a way to pass the time and refresh the coffers while we wait for your beloved Corellian parts," came the muffled reply.

Only Ghitsa's hindquarters, sticking out from a stowage closet, were visible. Fen had to resist the urge to administer a swift kick.

Ghitsa emerged a moment later, shaking out her prize.

Fen felt her jaw drop. "No," she said sternly.

Ghitsa responded by pulling on the simple robe.

"You must be joking!"

"Fen, you know I have no sense of humor." A metal cylindrical handle appeared from the robe's deep pocket. Ghitsa experimentally flicked the switch on and off. Nothing happened, of course.

Ghitsa pushed past her partner, headed for the main cabin. Fen once again trailed behind her.

"I'm surprised that after all these years you haven't been able to con a real one from someone," Fen mumbled.

Ghitsa was suddenly quite serious. "Given what we've heard recently about the Jedi Academy from the Fringe, I would not be surprised to see lightsabers showing up on the black market." Ghitsa stared at her, waiting, expectantly.

Fen hedged. "What?"

"You know what," Ghitsa said impatiently. "That rigged sabacc deck and the repulsor remote. Where are they?"

It was hopeless. Settling back into her seat with a resigned sigh, Fen said, "They're in the weapons closet, third shelf, in the back."

"How quaint," Ghitsa cooed, returning with Fen's lockbox. She set it on the table and sat across from Fen, helping herself to a glass of the Reserve. In the time it took Fen to pour herself another, Ghitsa had jimmied the box open.

"This is a really bad idea," Fen finally said.

Ghitsa picked up the fruit on the table and began drilling a delicate hole in it with her pocketknife. "I confirmed what was in the backgrounder. There are thousands of people in Lesvol and the only legal authority is more than two thousand kilometers away. It's chaos out there. I'd be providing them an invaluable service."

“For target practice,” Fen grumbled. “Don’t you remember what happened last time?”

Ghitsa nodded, but continued her carving.

“Can I just point out that the *Lady* is out of commission? We don’t have any way of getting out of here once they figure out you’re a fraud.”

“We shall just have to make sure they don’t figure it out then, won’t we?”

Fen swirled the golden liquor in her glass, admiring the way the contents clung to the sides before surrendering to gravity. “I’m not helping you this time,” she declared, knowing her resistance was as futile as her drink’s, but still feeling the need to make a token stand.

From across the table, Ghitsa handed her the remote’s tiny control. “Of course you will.”

Fen developed hate relationships with many places in the galaxy. She loathed Socorro during the hot season, detested Mos Eisley during the dusty season, and her irritation with the exorbitant prices of Coruscant during Fete Week was a matter of public record. But Lesvol on market day earned a whole new level of disdain.

With a deep breath Fen plunged into the throng of peasants and animals crowding the market square. Squeezing between an oversized vegetable cart and a booth of wheel-sized cheeses, Fen then swerved to avoid a shaggy something smelling vaguely of nerf. When a gap-toothed woman in shapeless black thrust a squawking bird in her face, Fen almost cooked both poultry and purveyor with a blaster bolt.

In contrast to Fen’s mad dashing and darting through the market, Ghitsa’s progress ahead was unhurried. Crowds and livestock magically parted for the woman in the brown robe. She walked serenely, the lightsaber handle swinging freely and conspicuously at her side. They were in the market barely ten

minutes when Fen began hearing the whispered word of awe and respect: “Jedi.”

Fen circled around, seeing Ghitsa find her target. Two quarreling men, one as short as the other was fat, had attracted a crowd. Words and spittle flew, with fists sure to follow, to the smaller man’s disadvantage. A groat stood between them, oblivious, complacently chewing her cud.

“Friends,” Fen heard Ghitsa say. “May I assist you?”

A hush fell as all eyes turned to the Jedi woman. “Who are you?” the larger man demanded.

“Jedi!” someone called from the back.

“Don’t look like no Jedi,” the man snarled.

Ghitsa smiled patiently. “Size and sex are not the measure of a Jedi, friend.” She gestured to a nearby fruit stand. “I do not approve of casual use of the Force,” her voice rang out. “But the gentleman here requests some verification.”

Ghitsa held out her right hand. Her left, Fen knew, concealed a tiny remote which controlled the repulsor. A bright orange fruit rose from atop the mounded produce display, circled above the stunned crowd, then fell into Ghitsa’s waiting palm.

She gathered the growing crowd with her eyes and authoritative presence. “I ask again, do you require the assistance of a Jedi?”

“I ask for Jedi mediation,” the small man stammered, with a feisty glare at his combatant. “Baxendahl here sold me a breeding groat, but she’s barren.”

Fen turned away and began pushing against the throng, shaking her head in disgust. Ghitsa would wield her negotiation skills as others used weapons and push the men to some settlement involving cost of a groat’s care, earning potential of a groat’s milk, and value between a breeding and a barren groat. The grateful participants would then pay her for the trouble in some local currency or good. By the end of the afternoon, with another piece of floating fruit and a few “I can read your mind” sabacc tricks, the Lesvol community would think Jedi Master

Skywalker himself had come to pay a visit. Force forgive her, but Fen didn't want to stay around to watch.

The moment would go down in the annals as one of the best of Fen's life. Twenty-nine days, fourteen hours, and twenty-seven minutes after a power flux forced her into the Maker-forsaken Lesvol, the brand-spanking-new Corellian Avatar-10 hyperdrive finally arrived.

"Cap'n, she's a beauty."

"That she is, Gibb." Fen sighed happily and gazed adoringly at the glistening drive, the stabilizers, the motivator, and the converters, spread out carefully and ordered. "I just wish we found the cause of that flux."

Gibb's small shoulders shrugged in his oversized uniform. "I've seen it on old YTs before, especially the ones with so many custom features and special modifications. At least you know you won't blow the Avatar when you put it in."

A month's close observation revealed that Gibb was a pretty fair mechanic. Fen hadn't asked, nor had Gibb explained, where he became so well acquainted with old-model starfighters and Corellian freighters. Everyone had a past and the secrets that go with it.

Gibb was right, though; these things did sometimes happen and the best you could hope for was that they don't kill you when they did.

Fen bent down, picked up a rock, and pitched it at a groat wandering too close to her new hyperdrive. With a frightened bleat the animal bolted across the landing pad.

"Jedi Ghitsa doesn't like it when you do that to her pets," Gibb warned, glancing about nervously.

"Well, she can just use her powers to stop me," Fen grouched. With her busy social and negotiation schedule, Ghitsa wasn't there, but that didn't stop even the sensible Gibb from worrying what the All-Knowing Jedi would see. The whole con was going



to Ghitsa's head and really getting to Fen. Apart from Ghitsa's solemn pontifications, the spaceport and ship filled with farm animals, sickly fruit wines, and other homegrown products—all gifts that grateful but very poor clients gave their revered, dealmaker Jedi.

"I'm gonna pull the readings off the old drive," Fen said, pulling her favorite scanner from her back pocket.

Gibb nodded. "I'll finish prepping the ship." He disappeared into the *Lady*, the tools on his belt clanking noisily.

They wrestled the old drive out of the ship and set it on the grass next to the landing pad. With a few well-aimed rocks, Fen scattered the birds—more gifts to Jedi Ghitsa—that had taken to roosting on the drive.

Squatting down, Fen gently turned the first section over and clicked on the scanner. She dusted off bits of blackened char between the two and three couplings, then continued down the drive shaft. And stopped.

Fen thumbed the scanner off and rocked back on her heels. The good news was that she had just found, buried in the most inaccessible part of the drive, what had caused the power flux. The bad news ...

The timid, "Uh, excuse me," so startled Fen that she reflexively hurled the nearest spanner in the direction of the voice.

Fen scrambled to her feet. The uninvited visitor hit the ground to avoid swallowing her thrown tool. "Ever heard of knocking?" she snapped. As he stood slowly, Fen took in the simple brown robe he wore and the untouched metal handle at his waist.

"Where?" He shrugged and looked about expressively. They were, after all, outside, on a spaceport landing pad.

Fen checked the grin. "Right ..." *They sure started them young at Skywalker's ranch*, Fen mused. *This one couldn't be a day over twenty.* But then, wild rumors about the Jedi Academy had been flying for months in the Fringe. *Could this soft-faced, shaggy-haired youth*

*really be a fully trained Jedi Knight? By all accounts, probably. And she could just guess what brought a Jedi Knight to the wilds of Lesvol.*

"Well, well," she said with a low whistle. "Could it be one of the ascetic Luke Skywalker's little followers in the flesh?"

He straightened with her challenge but stumbled over the words. "Yes, I'm from Master Skywalker's Academy. I'm Zeth Fost."

"Fenig Nabon. You can call me Fen." Another matter demanded her attention, one even more urgent than exploring what a real Jedi was doing here and what she was going to do about it. Fen crouched down again at the drive.

"I don't suppose the Force can tell you what these char marks between the couplings mean?"

Zeth squatted next to her. "It doesn't really work like that."

"Too bad." Fen pulled a magnifier from her front pocket and began crawling up the length of the drive shaft. There. Between the eighth and ninth couplings.

"What is it?" a soft voice asked, too close to her ear. She almost slugged him, just out of reflex.

"Here," she said and handed him the magnifier.

"It looks like a ... wire?"

"It's an old saboteur's trick. You create a complete circuit by connecting the couplings of a hyperdrive. A piece of wire as thin as a hair will do the job. Then send a spark up the drive shaft and it'll arc, from one coupling to the next. Fry the entire system." She waved at the drive's far end. "Somewhere in there I'll find the remains of a relay or battery that generated the power surge."

Zeth cleared his throat. "Do you know why?"

Fen slowly stood. "Yeah. Probably. Someone's likely gunning for my partner, Ghitsa Dogder."

There was a sharp but not very surprising intake of breath. "She's why I've come," Zeth said quickly, rising as well. "We've heard she is a very powerful Jedi and is doing much good here."

"Well, she's got a lot of enemies, too."

Fen was very proud she did not choke when Zeth intoned, “Those who do good things often have many enemies.” His young face turned somber. “And those with untrained Force powers can be manipulated. Where is she?” he asked, now sounding more urgent.

*As soon as he meets Ghits, the gig will be up,* Fen thought. *That alone would be worth the admission price.* “I don’t know,” she finally said, making her decision. “She had a negotiation today. But Gibb will know where she is.”

“Why didn’t you catch a shuttle?” Fen complained from the passenger seat of Zeth’s rented landspeeder.

“I didn’t know where to go,” Zeth responded. His eyes wandered about the bucolic landscape. “Everyone within a thousand kilometers was talking about the wonderful Jedi Ghitsa, but no one knew where she was.”

Fen drummed her fingers on the console. They had sabotaged the ship on Chad, known her route, and set the drive to blow in the first inhabited system. But who? And why?

“A Force-sensitive would be a very powerful asset to a criminal organization,” Zeth interrupted.

“Stay out of my head, spoonbender,” Fen snapped.

“I wasn’t in your head, Fen,” Zeth said calmly. “Just making an obvious observation.”

“Keep it that way, then.” Wanting to be conciliatory, but not apologetic, Fen added, “Lots of bad guys seem real determined to kidnap you Jedi types.”

Fen hadn’t expected Zeth to flinch so obviously. “What is it?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Turn right up ahead,” she instructed. He drove through a battered and ancient gate and they both fell silent.

Feeling the speeder steadily accelerate, Fen glanced at Zeth. He was staring ahead. She gave up trying to shake the anxiety mounting since they drove on to the property.

They rounded a blind turn and the farmhouse was only a few meters farther. Fen was out of the speeder before Zeth coaxed it to a stop. It wasn't just the look of grim concern on his face or the silence which alarmed her. No, it was the clenching feeling in her gut. She'd felt the same way when she'd returned to that Ord Mantell cantina and found the man who had been her father dead on the floor.

She yanked out her blaster and ran to the farmhouse. The door was open, ajar and askew. At the door's threshold lay a Jedi robe.

"I'm assuming it's someone from off-planet," Fen jabbered as they whizzed back through Lesvol. "I wonder why it took them so long?"

"They may have thought once your drive failed you would go to Nad'Ris," Zeth said. "And when you didn't, they looked the same way I did. A planet is a big place to search for a single person."

As the speeder banked hard on a turn, Fen was gratified Zeth was driving only slightly slower than she would be. "Gibb is checking for reports of any strangers. He may know something by the time we get back."

"What's next then?" the Jedi asked.

"Listen, Zeth," Fen began. "I appreciate the help, but I can handle this on my own."

When Zeth smiled, years seem to fall from him. "Jedi have a responsibility to Force-sensitives, especially those like Ghitsa who have a real gift others would exploit." His expression darkened abruptly. "It's hard to explain, but the Force guided me here. I'd like to see it through."

“Well, who am I to argue with cosmic fate and destiny?” Fen grumbled.

Gibb ran out to meet them when they pulled up at the port. Ignoring Zeth’s reprimanding frown, Fen again clambered out before he stopped the speeder. “What’ve you found, Gibb?” she asked, forcing calm into her voice as they jogged to the port building.

“Not much, Cap’n. I got a couple reports of a skiff going really fast toward Nad’Ris.”

She and Gibb pushed into the tiny port administration building. “How long ago?”

Fen grabbed a chair, but in hands not quite still it slipped from her grasp and clattered to the floor. Gibb waited until she righted it before responding. “Couple of hours.”

Zeth’s voice came from the door. “Why did they notice the skiff at all?”

Gibb eyed the Jedi, as if weighing where his loyalties lay. “It was big, new, fast. Nothing like that around here.”

Fen cracked her knuckles and smirked inwardly when Zeth winced at the sound. “Okay, Gibb, I need to slice into the Nad’Ris spaceport records. I’m looking for the incoming ship registry.”

The mechanic blanched, looking from Fen to Zeth and back again. “But Captain ...” he stammered.

“Now Gibb,” she began, popping her finger joints one at a time. “Just ’cause a self-appointed guardian of good is watching is no time to get all moral on me. The only way to figure out where Ghitsa’s gone is to look at where they probably took her, got it?”

Gibb nodded reluctantly, still eyeing the Jedi skeptically. Zeth winked and held out his hands in a “Who am I to argue?” gesture.

Fen scooted up to the data console. After several minutes of work she spun back around with a growl. “Gibb, why do you keep fidgeting?”

“Well, Captain. That will work eventually, but ...” Gibb glanced at Zeth, face creased with worry. “I know a quicker way.”

Zeth laughed. “Don’t worry, Gibb. I won’t tell.”

Gibb wilted with relief. Thirty seconds later they were scrolling through the Nad’Ris port entries.

“I need to see the ship names,” Zeth announced suddenly, crowding them at the terminal.

Throwing Zeth an annoyed look and an elbow in the ribs, Fen shot back, “And I need to see what flight plans and cargo they registered.”

Gibb keyed a command and three columns of information appeared. Fen began anxiously searching.

“There!” Zeth suddenly exulted.

He shrank back as Fen pinned him with a favored glare from her extensive repertory. “And why do you think so?”

“Just the name, Rooky,” Zeth hedged. “I have a feeling about it.”

“A feeling? Sorry, Jedi, but we need something solid.” Fen turned back to study the screen. “I don’t suppose your feeling noticed the *Rook* arrived the day after I did, registered a flight plan from Chad and Nal Hutta, and made no customs declaration, even though a ship that class has over two thousand metric tons of cargo space?”

“Cap’n,” Gibb said, new worry coloring his tone. “See that blinking indicator? The *Rook* filed clearance to leave.”

Fen felt cold dread settle in her stomach like the local brew. “How long?”

“An hour, maybe two.”

Zeth moved in closer, studying the flashing light. “It’ll take us all night to get back to Nad’Ris, unless you’ve got something faster than my speeder.”

There wasn’t anything else. They all knew that. The *Lady*’s drive was still in pieces. Nothing in the port could run, much less

fly. Fen began working furiously on the console's keypad. "If you've got any tricks, I could use 'em," she said to Zeth.

"I told you, it doesn't work that way."

*Why was a hermetic Force zealot barely out of his teens so gloomy?* Fen pushed aside the thoughts clouding her rapid-fire keystrokes.

"Well, good thing I've got a few tricks," she said.

Behind her she heard Gibb's low chortle. "That'll keep them here into the next growing season, Cap'n."

Fen pushed out of her seat. Seeing Zeth grinning at her handiwork on the terminal, she felt the satisfaction of being able to impress a Jedi.

She tugged on Zeth's arm. "Come on. Let's move."

Songs of lovers lost or left behind and the intoxicants consumed to forget them were woven into the fabric of every culture built around spacefaring and alcohol production. Corellia had a million such madrigals; Fen knew half of them, and had lived the other half. When she'd been a small, dirty-faced child, singing the off-color lyrics in a busy spaceport was a sure way to earn a few extra credits or even a hot meal. Now, thirty-some years later, she sang them when she was nervous, excited, or drunk.

Fen dashed about the *Lady's* main cabin gathering her gear. "Best I can hope for is a long life and a merry one. A quick death and an easy one." Singing slightly offkey, she snapped the last drawer closed.

Zeth stood patiently, saying nothing as Fen added two more detonators to the pile on the table in front of him.

"A fast ship and a sturdy one," Fen sang with more gusto about the ship than the easy death. She began methodically tucking the toys and gadgets into her flight-suit pockets. "A tall ale and another one," she finished with a flourish.

Fen dropped a vibro-shiv into each boot and added her lucky hold-out blaster to yet another pocket at her sleeve. With a

satisfied sigh she began checking the settings on her heavy blaster.

Zeth ran a hand over his mouth to keep from smirking. He then removed his belt, placed it on the table, and shrugged out of his Jedi robe. Balling it up, he tossed the robe into the corner. He again donned his belt, unclipped the lightsaber hanging there, and slipped it into a pocket at his side. "Well?" he finally asked. "Do I pass?"

"Take that earnest expression off your face and it just might work."

The smile finally broke out, and he glanced away to hide it.

"You have a sidearm?" Fen asked, circling around him for a more thorough inspection.

"I don't need one."

"Wait. Don't tell me. The Force will protect you."

"Actually, I figured you were carrying enough firepower to defend me and Coruscant." When the only reply was Fen's evil eye, Zeth amended; "I have my lightsaber ... and the Force."

"This is my Force power. It's called a blaster." She sent the weapon in its home at her hip. "Let's go."

Fen was usually about as communicative as a Gamorrean. But charging along a dark thoroughfare to rescue someone who didn't deserve saving seemed to inspire confidences. So as she slammed down bottle after bottle of a carbonated, highly charged drink, appropriately dubbed Rush, the words tumbled out of her with a speed rivaling that of their headlong race into the night.

She told Zeth about her youth on the streets of Coronet and even a little bit about Jett.

Zeth's tale, like hers, began haltingly, then flowed. On learning he had been on Kessel, they spent the past hour trading Moruth Doole stories.

"So, anyway," Zeth said, taking another long pull on his bottle. "I never would have gotten off Kessel if Han hadn't shown up."



"Solo?" Fen choked back a swallow of her Rush.

"Yeah," Zeth waited a beat before adding, "You know him."

"Stay outta my mind, Jedi," she warned.

"I wasn't in it," he shot back. "But I can't help it if you broadcast your feelings like an emotional holovid."

"Guess I'll just have to think quieter around you, won't I?" Fen clamped her mouth shut.

"You have deep feelings and strong loyalties," Zeth pontificated. "Why do you try hiding them?" Not put off by her stony silence, he pushed, "Because if you don't, then why are we going after Ghitsa, anyway? Space, you don't even like her."

"Because she's my partner, that's why," Fen finally burst out. "And no one harms any partner of mine. Except me."

"Did someone harm Jett?" Zeth asked gently.

Fen laughed, short and bitter. "If you call a vibro-shiv through the neck harm, then I guess so."

"I'm sorry, Fen," he said softly.

She wanted to hold on to the anger, as she would a blaster or a lover. But instead, with Zeth's unsolicited and compassionate sincerity, she felt the hurt drain away without the energy to maintain it. "Thanks," she said and sarcasm was the best she could muster. "That's mighty Jedi of you."

Fen looked quickly enough to see Zeth smile.

"So from where does this disdain for Jedi spring?" he asked. "Your denigration approaches an art form."

"Oh, I don't know," Fen replied, matching his lighter tone. "I just have a problem with authority and earnest self-righteousness."

"No Sith," Zeth retorted.

"Watch your mouth, junior. That kind of language could get you in trouble."

Zeth laughed. "You're right. If I go back swearing like a smuggler, they'll never let me out again."

Fen smirked in spite of herself. "Just tell them you learned it all from a great master."

His laughter abruptly stopped. Zeth turned away to stare moodily into the darkness.

They rode in silence as Fen tried to work out what she had said to provoke Zeth's capricious reaction. Giving up, she tried the blunt approach. "So, as long as we're spilling our souls all over the deck here, what's this bantha on your back? Did you drop a rock on another spoonbender or something?"

Zeth remained mute, as if weighing what to tell her. His voice was distant and sorrowful when he finally spoke. "I used my power as a Jedi ... for revenge."

Fen glanced at Zeth. He was staring down at his upturned palms as if they were somehow dirty. She tore her eyes from the sight to concentrate again on the road. Vengeance was something she could certainly understand, but Fen suddenly didn't want to hear any more of this young man's tortured story. Before she could say anything, Zeth continued.

"In my arrogance I thought the ends justified the means." Zeth's voice dropped to a whisper. "My brother and many others paid the price for my fall to the dark side."

Fen gasped as the pieces began to fall into place. The wild rumors she had heard, the things he had said. When the answer finally popped into her consciousness, she'd never be sure if she deduced it herself or if he had planted it there. "Carida," she breathed. Millions dead, billions, an entire star system wiped out of existence.

She swerved the speeder to the side, slamming on the brakes as her mind screamed again. "*Carida!*" Aghast, she turned to see the Jedi staring out the window, fighting the tears clinging to his lashes. He nodded ever so slightly.

She was sharing a landspeeder, her life, with the most notorious mass murderer since Palpatine. This innocent looking man, this kid, was another Vader. A butcher. *He killed billions.*

Suddenly claustrophobic in the close speeder, Fen fumbled for an escape. A cool breeze flooded in as she shoved the hatch open. Fen staggered across the road, feeling the universe buckle

under her feet. *Billions dead.* And she liked him. That was the worst of it. She had fallen completely for his wide-eyed innocence, the shy smile.

The incongruity hit her like a nova. She lost the battle to control her spiraling emotions and the waves of nausea splashing over her. Falling to her knees, Fen emptied her stomach into the soft, tilled field.

The universe had just stopped spinning when she heard him come up behind her. Fen struggled to her feet.

"So, you're Sithin' Durrone?" she demanded. "Kyp Durrone?"

"Yes."

"You lied to me." Fen straightened up and shoved her hands into her pockets, staring down at her feet. She needed new boots, she noted, then mentally kicked herself for allowing such a thought now.

"Yes," Kyp responded after a long pause.

"They have a word for what you did. It's called genocide."

"I know," Kyp replied, his voice breaking slightly.

Fen spun around, blind wrath overcoming self-preservation. She poked her index finger in the center of his chest. "Then tell me, Jedi," she choked on the word. "How come you're allowed to roam the galaxy recruiting others, recruiting my partner, to follow in your footsteps?"

Kyp remained silent, shoulders hunched, staring at the ground.

"Why aren't you in jail?" she demanded. Giving him another, much harder shove, she shrieked, "Why weren't you executed?"

He fell to the ground in an unresisting heap. "I don't know," Kyp said, his voice ragged. "I should be. I should be dead."

Fen went for the reassurance of her blaster, bitterly cold to the touch. She raised it, taking aim at the filth before her. She had killed better than this before and for less than crimes against the galaxy.

He finally looked up at her, and she could see tears glistening on his face. "No one would ever blame you, Fen, for killing the murderer of billions of sentients."

Fen felt an itching in her fingers. *He wants me to kill him*, she abruptly realized.

*Please, Fen*, came the wail in her mind. He outstretched his hands to her.

Fen was moved, but not to pity. “You’re a real black-hearted coward, Jedi,” she snarled, thrusting the blaster back in her holster. “Trying to get me to do something you don’t have the courage to do yourself.”

She hauled him to his feet. “Listen, you Sith Lord.” She forced as much venom into the invective as she could and had the pleasure of seeing him wince at an epithet that was no longer amusing. Fen vowed she would never use the curse again. “I don’t give ten credits whether you live or die. I’d gladly cut you down and rid the universe of your miserable existence.” She roughly grabbed him by the elbow, propelling him to the speeder. “But not until after we get my partner out. Got it?”

“And I’m telling you again,” Ghitsa responded patiently. “I’ve never heard of this before.”

Culan Brasli’s blow knocked her out of the chair. Bound at the hands and ankles, Ghitsa managed to twist her body so only muscle met the unyielding ship deck.

“That’s not what we hear, Counselor,” Brasli sneered.

Ghitsa had been beaten many times before. It was an occupational hazard working for the Hutts. On a scale of one to ten, Brasli’s efforts were about an eight, maximizing pain while minimizing long-term damage. *A true artisan*. She curled up into a ball, making a smaller target for the inevitable kick. Brasli really put his weight into it as his heavy foot slammed into her, again and again....

Dawn was less than an hour away. Fen followed the speeder’s map through Nad’Ris to the spaceport and an alley that ran along the back of the port. She maneuvered the speeder down the

narrow passage, weaving back and forth between the trash and broken, pitted pavement.

They hadn't exchanged two sentences since Kyp's revelations on the darkened roadway. She eased the speeder into a sheltered alcove and shut it down. When he still didn't say anything, Fen asked, "You coming?"

Kyp hopped out of the speeder but remained mute.

The back port wall loomed above them, slimy, dirty and a full five meters high. Scanning up and down the alley, Fen found the hoped-for service entrance. "I'm going to try getting it open," she indicated with a nod. "You stand watch, okay?"

Fen pulled a palm-sized device from a pocket and set it over the door's security lock.

"Is that what I think it is?" Kyp asked.

Fen cocked an eyebrow at his disapproving voice. "If you think it's an Opirus Model FD Sixty-Two security descrambler, then it's exactly what you think it is."

"Aren't those illegal?"

"So's murder," Fen scoffed.

It was several moments before Kyp asked quietly, "Did you murder everyone you thought was responsible for Jett's death?"

Fen almost dropped the descrambler. She could tell where this was going; being on the moral high ground was a rarity she wasn't anxious to give up.

"Did you?" Kyp repeated.

"Yes," she finally said, as slowly as the descrambler was working.

"If more people had been responsible, would you have retaliated against them, too?"

"You killed billions!" Fen burst out. She glanced nervously around, but the alley remained deserted.

"I know," Kyp moaned. "I relive it every day. But given the power and means, wouldn't you have done the same to avenge Jett?"

The answer wasn't nearly as simple as it should have been.

The sound of a slick-as-grease human voice woke her. “Brasli, please seat the Counselor.”

Ghitsa craned her neck but got only lancing agony for the trouble. Brasli roughly yanked her up from the deck and shoved her into a chair.

Across a table from her sat a young, well-dressed man. “I apologize for Brasli’s enthusiasm.” He waved his hand, fingering a datacard between his fingers. Ghitsa noticed a datapad on the table that hadn’t been there before. “Untie her, Brasli.”

Ghitsa gasped as he loosened the bonds, feeling blood rush to her feet and hands. Although he commanded even Brasli’s obedience, the man who gave the unquestioned order was too young and unpolished to have occupied the position very long. His suit indicated more wealth than taste.

“Do your Desilijic Clan masters know your Coruscantan accent is faked?” Ghitsa asked through a split and bleeding lip.

He flushed. “No one mentioned the Desilijics, or indeed the Hutts, at all.”

“Brasli and I have met before. And I’ve been aboard the *Rook* several times.” Ghitsa felt a warm trickle and impatiently wiped the blood from her chin. “Admittedly the circumstances were different.”

“No doubt during the time your Hutt clan methodically stripped my own.”

With his appropriately calm, detached response, Ghitsa conceded that the Desilijics had not sent someone completely green for this assignment. She needed more information if she was going to talk her way out of this one. “Counselor, I do not know your name.”

He continued flipping the datacard in his fingers as if it were a sabacc card. *A sabacc card*, Ghitsa mused. *He started as a gambler.*

“I am Counselor Ral,” he said decisively, sliding the card into the pad on the table. “And now, Counselor Dogder, we will discuss Durga the Hutt’s investment in the Orko Consortium.”

"I wouldn't have done it," Fen said. She modulated the descrambler again, but it was one year too old and the door was one year too new.

"I know," Kyp replied from where he stood watch. "But you did think about it?"

"Yes." She truly had. In her grief and despair over Jett's murder, Fen acted more violently than at any other time in her life. But still, she wouldn't have gone as far as her Jedi lookout.

"I hate what I did. There are days when I think the guilt will drive me mad," Kyp said, his voice wavering. "It would be easier if I were locked up somewhere."

"Or dead," Fen offered helpfully.

"As you said, that's the coward's way out."

Fen pocketed the descrambler and brushed her hands off on the front of her flight suit. "This isn't going to work. We have to find another way in."

Kyp slumped against the wall, hanging his head miserably. His bangs again fell over his eyes. "They didn't lock me away, and I'm not dead." He choked on a dry sob. "What am I supposed to do, Fen?"

"How should I know?" Fen retorted, angry that she actually felt sorry for him. Fen Nabon as judge, moralist, and confessor? If it weren't so comical it would be grotesque. Other priorities were more pressing than a murderer's atonement.

She cleared her throat roughly. "I guess you just make sure it never happens again."

Kyp drew his arms protectively around himself. "What if that's not enough?"

"You do what the rest of us do." She lifted his chin with her forefinger, forcing him to look at her. "The best you can."

"But if I fail ..." he trailed off.

"I'll hunt you down and kill you myself." Their eyes met, and then Fen tore away from his grateful stare. "Come on. Time for Plan B."

“Your sources err,” Ghitsa said, with a patience she didn’t feel. “I haven’t worked for Durga’s clan for over three years.”

The blast of a voice over a comm at the cabin door startled all of them. “Counselor?” the disembodied and deferential speaker asked.

“I told you not to interrupt us,” Ral snapped. Striding to the comm, he adjusted the controls so Ghitsa could not overhear the apparent orders and counterorders.

“I’ll be right up,” Ral said curtly. He awarded her a dark glare. “It seems that Nad’Ris Customs refuses to lift the quarantine placed on our ship for suspected biological contagions.”

“Indeed?” Ghitsa queried blandly, heart leaping. Slicing into the Nad’Ris records to embargo the ship would be classic Fen.

“It is remarkable since the *Rook* declared no cargo,” Ral mused. He nodded to Brasli. “Clean her up. Customs will be inspecting the ship. Then lock the good Counselor in here, so she may refresh her recollections undisturbed.” She remained impassive under his thoughtful stare, but Ral was as shrewd. “And Brasli, alert your team. We must be ready for any uninvited guests.”

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“We should be within a bay or two of where the *Rook*’s docked,” Fen commented. They hid behind a trash heap in the alley. The port’s back wall towered above them.

“We’re going to have to hurry,” Kyp said, turning toward her. His serious countenance suddenly changed, a smirk appearing where solemnity had been. His eyes flickered up to her face.

“What is it?” Fen growled, brushing a loose strand of hair away with her elbow.

“There’s something you should know.”

“What now?”

“There’s a big smudge of dirt on your forehead.”



Fen felt her face redden and warm. She wiped her forehead with her glove and saw a large smear of black grease. Groaning, she remembered working on the *Lady's* drive a lifetime ago. "It's been on there since you met me at the ship, right?"

The smirk was now a full-blown grin. "Uh-huh."

"You could have said something," she accused, still wiping.

"I just did." Kyp raised his hand, touching her temple, "You missed a spot."

Oddly, Fen didn't shudder at his touch. "Is it gone?" she asked, rubbing her face again.

He nodded and turned back to study the wall. "We could climb it."

Fen reached a quick decision. "Kyp, there's something I should tell you."

He glanced at her quizzically. "Do I have food stuck in my teeth?"

"It's about Ghitsa."

"I know already, Fen," Kyp interrupted.

Rage swept through her again. "You were reading my mind!" she accused.

Kyp rolled his eyes. "I didn't need to. I've been searching through the Force since I landed. I would have sensed someone with Ghitsa's reputed skills pretty quickly, especially once she was kidnapped."

"You've known all along?" she stammered. "And you were still gonna help me spring a cheap con who finally got what she had coming to her?"

"I know you don't like to hear it, but the Force guided me here." He took a deep breath. "I think I'm beginning to see why."

Fen digested that fact and finally felt an easier truce settle between them. She scrambled to her feet. "Why don't you try using the Force to throw the rope and grappling hook over the wall?"

Kyp nodded and rose with the rope they brought from the speeder. He swung the hook up in a smooth arc. They heard a gentle clatter. Kyp tested his weight on the line, then clambered up the wall as easily as an insect.

Fen's ascent was not nearly as graceful. She was grunting with the effort when something suddenly scooped her up and deposited her on the top of the wall.

"Easy," Kyp muttered, lending a steadying hand as Fen teetered on the narrow ledge.

To her annoyance, he seemed perfectly balanced five meters above the ground. Fen glared at him, but Kyp was neither intimidated, nor apologetic. He only shrugged. "Force grip."

"Oh. Thanks," Fen managed. She quickly scanned the port. "There." She pointed at a hulking Ghtroc freighter two docking bays over.

They ran lightly across the top of the wall, a race against the coming dawn and prying eyes. From the wall Kyp leaped to a rung on the ship's hull and climbed up to the *Rook*'s top hatch. Fen was right behind him.

Kyp gave the hatch lever a strong pull. It didn't move. "It's locked!"

"Of course it is." Fen withdrew another device from her pockets of tricks.

"Let me guess," Kyp asked. "An illegal shipjacking kit?"

She set the decoder over the hatch lock, and it began rapidly scrolling through security combinations, one digit at a time. "I bet you keep all your ships unlocked on Yavin Four, don't you?" Fen swallowed the remainder when she saw his stricken expression and remembered why he might be sensitive to ship thieving. "Forget it. Sorry."

Fen heard the gentle whirring of gears, then a soft snap. "Are we clear down there?" she demanded, returning the device to her pocket.

Kyp nodded. With her left hand on the hatch, Fen drew her blaster with her right.

“Wait,” Kyp ordered.

Now she was really angry. “What?”

“Your blaster,” Kyp said, very earnestly.

“If you think I’m going in there without my blaster ...”

Kyp shook his head vigorously. “No, of course you should. But, Fen, you’ve got to put it on a stun setting.”

“Don’t go getting all Jedi on me.”

“Fen, killing them won’t bring Jett back.”

He said it so gently she had to fight through a bantha-sized lump in her throat to respond. “And not killing them won’t bring your brother back.”

Kyp looked at the lightsaber clutched in his hand. “I know. And I’ll help you, Fen, regardless. But don’t make me go down there knowing that more might die when I could have done something to prevent it.”

He had found her vulnerability and twisted it for all it was worth. “Stun may not stop what they throw at us,” she warned.

“I know,” Kyp said. “But it’s the right thing to do.”

“No good being right if you’re dead,” Fen retorted. They’d wasted enough time, she told herself, as she thumbed her blaster to a stun setting. She popped the hatch open; warm, yellow light poured out.

Kyp dropped down. Fen was less adroit, grabbing the sides of the hatch and hoisting herself into the hole. What should have been a fall felt like a slide through feathers, and she landed lightly and soundless. *Convenient thing, that Force grip.*

Kyp glanced around quickly, then pushed a pressure plate on the wall. A door slid open and they scurried into the dark cabin. “How should we look for her?” he asked.

“Can’t you just sense her, or something?” Fen said, as she quickly studied the room.

“No, I’ve tried. There are a lot of fearful humans on this ship.” Kyp suddenly moved back to the door. “Someone’s coming!” he announced.

“Really? Well, I’ve never been afraid to ask for directions.”

Kyp eased the cabin door open as heavy footfalls moved passed. They slipped out silently and Fen exulted in the reunion.

"Hello, Brasli." Fen underscored her cheery greeting by ramming her blaster muzzle into the thug's back.

Brasli stopped abruptly.

"That's right," Fen cooed. "Put your hands up and away from that nice blaster at your side."

"I figured you'd show up for that Sithin' partner of yours, Nabon," Brasli sneered, slowly turning around to face her.

"No swearing around Jedi," Fen remonstrated as Kyp relieved Brasli of his weapon. "Now, are you going to tell me where she is, or is this Jedi going to have to go into that mass of pathetic neurons you call a brain and pull it out?"

When she and Kyp burst into the cabin, with Brasli at the end of a blaster muzzle, Ghitsa's exclamation of "Fen!" encompassed relief and a question, all in a single word.

Fen roughly shoved Brasli into a chair. "Sit." To Ghitsa she said, "Got anything to tie him up?"

"What Brasli used on me will work admirably on him," Ghitsa said, snapping a length of cord in her hands.

There was an ugly bruise across Ghitsa's face, but she was mobile. "You okay?" Fen blurted as she let go of the mental image of another partner's blood staining the floor.

"Nothing that a week in a spa won't cure." As Ghitsa trussed and gagged Brasli, the man's grunts reflected her enthusiasm for the task. Ghitsa let the moments beat by, then, as her cunning eyes slid over Kyp, added, "So Fen, you've found a real Jedi."

Reluctant to disclose his secret, Fen was relieved when Kyp stepped forward. "I'm Kyp Durrón."

Ghitsa started. "Durrón? Jedi Kyp Durrón?"

"Save it for later," Fen broke in. Ghitsa had worked for Hutts; she'd be able to handle rescue by a mass murderer.

"I sealed the door," Kyp offered.

“Then how will we get out?” Fen countered.

They all jumped as a new, commanding voice burst into the cabin. “Brasli, report!”

Ghitsa pointed at the comlink affixed to Brasli’s collar. “It’s Counselor Ral. He’s running this operation.”

Fen strode to the bound man, tore the gag from his mouth and aimed her blaster squarely between his eyes. “You are going to answer your comlink. You try being cute and I’ll blow you apart.”

Brasli nodded. “What is it, Ral?” His voice was rough but otherwise normal.

“Where are you?”

“Tell him you’re here,” Fen mouthed.

“I’m with Counselor Dogder,” Brasli rasped.

“Good,” the other voice barked. “Stay there. We may have been boarded. We’re searching the ship now.”

The other voice clicked off. As Fen crammed the gag back in Brasli’s mouth, Ghitsa plucked the comlink from his uniform and affixed it to her own collar.

“Fen,” Kyp called.

“Yeah?”

He was studying the cabin wall. “This is an exterior bulkhead, right?”

“There’s about a half meter of reinforced hull between you and the big, bad galaxy, if that’s what you mean. What are you...”

Fen’s words died in her throat and Ghitsa’s sharp gasp was abruptly drowned out by the low hum of the bright violet blade in Kyp’s hand.

*A Jedi Knight and a lightsaber.* It was almost holy, harkening back to an era long gone in her lifetime. Impossibly it lived again in the cramped cabin of a Hutt freighter.

Kyp laughed. “Now, Fen, don’t you start. I’ll just cut through and we’ll be out of here.” He pivoted to Ghitsa and offered her the shimmering lightsaber. “Unless you would like to do it?”

"No, wait!" Fen cried as Kyp raised his lightsaber. "If you cut through there, it'll set off the hull breach alarms. They'll be on top of us before we can get out of here."

"I could cover you," Kyp asserted.

"Both of us? For how long?" Fen responded. *And with how many dead?* she added silently for Kyp. When he nodded slightly, Fen knew he understood. "It's still a good idea though." She strode over to the cabin's control panel and tore off the cover.

Her partner was already anticipating Fen's plan. "Do you have something that can generate a continuous loop?" Ghitsa asked.

"Yeah. I think we can rig one of the no-shows I brought." Fen reached into a pocket at her thigh and pulled out the device. She handed it to Ghitsa. "See what you can do with it."

"What's a no-show?" Kyp asked over her shoulder. He had, Fen noticed, shut down the lightsaber.

"Something else you wouldn't approve of," Fen said lightly.

"It's a passive field generator," Ghitsa explained. Fen heard a snap as the no-show split in Ghitsa's hands. "Wearing one makes you invisible to most detection technologies."

"The cabin's sensors for things like hull integrity all run through this circuit," Fen said, working a pair of cutters out of another pocket with one hand and pointing to the wiring in the wall. "From here it feeds into the ship's computer."

"So you are going to slice into it and use the no-show to create an uninterrupted feed from here to the computer?" Kyp's voice indicated he wasn't quite cut out for this sort of skullduggery.

"More or less," Fen responded, sorting through the multicolored wires in the panel. *Which one was for hull integrity again?* She shrugged the doubt away, jammed the cutters between her teeth, and began teasing green wire out of the panel. "Ghits," she mumbled through a mouthful of tool, "you got that gen rigged yet?"

"Yes."

As her partner clamped the generator onto the wire, Fen commented, "I've never seen a hairpin used like that before."

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Fen.”

Fen spit out the cutters and sliced into the circuit. She held a ragged breath, but no alarms sounded. “That should keep them off our backs.”

They both pivoted about on hearing the hum as Kyp again ignited his lightsaber. He swung the blade over his head and began slicing through half a meter of metal like a boot through mud.

“You know, Fen,” Ghitsa commented, staring at the young Jedi now deliberately sawing through ship hull. “I don’t want to see a lightsaber on the black market. Ever.”

Kyp was through in a few edgy minutes and closed down the lightsaber. “There’s a skin of metal still holding it on. We’ll have to push our way out.”

Fen put a shoulder to the makeshift door.

As Ghitsa hesitated, Fen chided her, “Come on. Here’s a use for those shoulder pads.”

“I was just wondering what we do once we break out of the ship?”

Fen looked at Kyp. He shrugged. “Run?”

Chuckling, Fen started the count. On her “Three!” the hull plate buckled, then clattered to the ground. Fresh air and light streamed in. “Anyone around?” she asked Kyp.

He shook his head. “For now, no. But we don’t have much time.”

“One more thing,” Ghitsa injected, with a nod toward the wide-eyed Brasli, still tied to the chair. “Shouldn’t we dispose of him?”

Fen understood from where that desire for revenge came. Brasli obviously worked over her partner pretty hard, judging from the bruises and busted lip.

Kyp solved the problem by jumping out the door to the ground some two meters below. “Come on,” he gestured.

She jumped down and Ghitsa followed. They landed in the shadow of the *Rook*’s underbelly, concealed by a landing skid.

Kyp gestured to the docking bay's entrance on the other side of the landing pad. "I think that's the only way out."

"And it's in the line of their laser cannons," Fen noted, heart sinking.

Ghitsa pursed her lips. "I bet they've security coded the door, too."

Kyp pushed the hair out of his face again, a gesture that was part need and part unconscious habit. "Fen, if you can take whatever comes out of the ship, and Ghitsa, you work the door, I'll handle the rest."

"Just like that?" Fen challenged.

The Jedi Knight nodded. "Just stay behind me."

They had covered half the distance between the ship's bow and the docking bay exit. Fen was beginning to think maybe no one would notice when Kyp started yelling.

"Get to the door," he called.

Behind them, Fen heard the earsplitting whine of laserfire. She instinctively ducked and pushed Ghitsa forward to the entrance, but couldn't place what the ricochet sound was.

Fen whirled around and, for a second, reflexes honed by years of dodging and answering blasterfire failed her.

Kyp, the kid of a Jedi, was standing alone in the middle of the docking bay. Laserfire poured from the *Rook's* forward guns. And like some weird children's toy, Kyp caught the green killing bolts on his lightsaber and tossed them away.

"Fen!" she heard Ghitsa shout. She spun about. Her partner was under the entrance's marginal cover. "It is locked. You'll need to hold them off a few minutes."

*A few minutes.* It was a lifetime in moments like this. She ran back to Kyp. Methodically, even calmly, he deflected each burst of fire. The blasts bounced off the lightsaber, ricocheting at crazy angles.

Out of the corner of her vision, Fen saw movement, flickers at the top of the *Rook's* ramp, inside the ship. From behind Kyp's protective cover she crouched down, steadied her blaster on her



knee and caught each of the Hutt henchmen in a blue wave of stun blasts as they emerged from the ship.

Her mind had been ticking off the seconds. She knew, rationally, they had not been under fire for more than a minute. It seemed an eternity. Ghitsa was good at locks, but they were only two people against an entire ship. If Kyp started to get tired, or faltered just once ...

The wail of repulsors suddenly filled the docking bay. *What the ...* Fen glanced up, wondering why it had gone so dark. A freighter hovered overhead. It was obviously piloted by someone who was really angry, and a friend, Fen concluded with surprise, as the ship poured cannon fire into the *Rook*.

The *Rook* shuddered, helpless on the ground. Fen stared again at the ship, noticing the distinctive bow markings, the equipment standard on no other YT. The *Star Lady*? What was her ship doing here?

Fen's personal comlink burst to life. "Cap'n, this is Gibb. I figured you might need some help." He underscored the point with another deafening volley into the grounded ship.

The roar of the *Rook* coming to life drowned out Fen's shrieking invective at the reckless mechanic. The *Rook*'s repulsors screamed, blowing dust in the landing bay. Threatened from above, the ship abandoned her victims on the ground and surged up. Fen felt her heart stop as the *Rook* swerved and narrowly missed the hovering *Star Lady*. Free of the docking bay, the *Rook* shot into the sky.

"Gibb!" she screeched into the comlink. "You bring my ship back! Don't you dare ..." But Gibb did dare, darting after the retreating *Rook*.

"It's all right Cap'n. She's running now. I've called Nad'Ris Customs. They'll intercept."

Fen yanked a pair of macrobinoculars out of another pocket and glued her eyes to the scene.

"Who's that piloting the *Star Lady*?" she heard Ghitsa ask.

"Gibb," came Kyp's weary voice.

With a supreme effort Fen tore herself away from the vision of the *Lady* chasing the much bigger, and better armed, Ghtroc.

In a tone full of disbelieving admiration, Ghitsa added, "It really was good of you to let Gibb fly the *Lady* here."

Fen could only nod weakly. To Kyp, she managed, "You did great."

Kyp smiled back and pushed sweaty hair off his forehead. "I'm just glad we didn't have to kill any of them."

"Actually ..." Ghitsa began.

Frowning, Fen asked, "What?"

"Well, they have no way of knowing about that hole Kyp cut in the hull. If they get too high up."

Kyp turned gray. "Gibb!" Fen yelled into the comlink. "Back off! Tell Nad'Ris Customs not to chase them. That ship's not spaceworthy. She'll blow if she goes much higher."

Ghitsa looked bewildered. "What's the problem?"

"Later, Ghits." To Kyp she said, "Can't you do something so they turn back?"

Kyp was looking up, into the space of sky the ships were heading. "Even if I could, the Force shouldn't be used that way."

His piercing sorrow made Fen ache.

Ghitsa humphed, then unclipped the comlink she'd taken from Brasli and thumbed it on. "I'm warning you though, it won't work."

"Try!" Fen demanded.

"Counselor Ral, this is Dogder." She smoothly cut off his sputtering rage. "Yes, as you have surmised, I have Brasli's comlink. Now, Ral, I am quite serious here. You have a hull breach. You'll never clear the lower atmosphere. You have to come back."

They heard laughter. "He's a gambler," Ghitsa explained. "He thinks I'm bluffing."

"Try again," Fen urged.

Staring into the sky, Kyp murmured, "Customs still thinks the ship is under quarantine. They'll try to stop it."

Fen brought the macrobinocs back up to her face. She could just make out the *Rook*. Per her orders, Gibb had not pursued. But Fen could see two smaller ships moving fast and firing wildly at the retreating *Rook*.

"Ral, this is Counselor's oath," Fen heard Ghitsa say. "I swear you have a hull breach."

"Too late," Kyp whispered.

From the comlink they heard a scream, then a burst of static. Through the macrobinocs, Fen saw a flash. And the *Rook* was gone.

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It was the one place in the galaxy Fen thought she would never go. They landed on a humble pad at the base of an enormous stone structure. A temple, Fen guessed, built by some ancient and subjugated race. A rather odd place for a Jedi Academy, she thought.

Through the cockpit viewport they could all see a cluster of very somber, brown-clad beings of varying sexes and species. "Welcoming committee?" she asked Kyp, forcing a quip.

Kyp shook his head, shrugging out of his seat restraints. "Something's going on."

Fen slid out of her seat, but Ghitsa remained glued to her chair.

"You're not coming?" Kyp asked her.

Ghitsa looked away from the grave Jedi outside the ship. "No, Kyp," she said slowly. "I don't think so." Confirming that the experience had not irrevocably sobered her, she added, "Not even if I could pick up a few pointers for next time."

Kyp's mouth turned up in the beginning of knowing grin. "Be true to yourself, Ghitsa Dogder. That's the only pointer you'll ever need." He slipped out of the cockpit. With a final glance back at Ghitsa, Fen followed him out.

In a show of initiative that could become irritating if it were habitual, Kyp had already opened the ship's hatch. A whoosh of hot, humid air surged into the cabin, leaving Fen momentarily breathless.

Kyp trotted down the ramp to his friends, or whatever they were, Fen thought sullenly. She followed, refusing to be cowed and annoyed that these priests could probably divine how nervous she really was.

He exchanged a few words with them and the other Jedi dispersed. One woman, however, remained, exuding to Fen's eye a proprietary protectiveness. Fen leaned indolently against a landing-ramp strut, returning the suspicion with a sardonic glare of her own.

Kyp hurried back, his face, Fen thought, a bit drawn. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"Tionne says Master Skywalker has been injured."

"Again?"

He smirked. "They've just broken orbit and should be in shortly." Kyp shifted, uncomfortably, as if he could feel the hot ground through his boots. "I should ..."

Fen waved him off. "I hate good-byes," she said gruffly, wondering why her eyes were misting. Must be something in the wretched jungle air. "Get going. We'll see ourselves out." She turned, only to stiffen as a gentle hand at her shoulder brought her back around.

Kyp ducked his head, then glanced up through bangs that really needed a trim now. "I'll miss you, too, Fen." He let his hand fall from her shoulder, blushing shyly at the bold move. "You sure you don't want to stay for a few days?"

"Positive. You're needed here." Fen glanced at the woman who must be Tionne, still patiently waiting. "And the Academy certainly doesn't need me."

She held out her hand, wishing now that the words weren't sticking in her craw. "But if lifting big rocks doesn't work out, there's always a place for you on my crew."

He stared at her offered hand for what seemed forever, then slowly took it, wrapping it in both of his own. "Thanks, Fen. For everything." As Kyp stumbled for something to say, Fen pulled away.

"You too, Jedi." She pivoted on a heel and headed back up the ramp without looking back. Kyp finally found the words that had eluded him when she heard softly in her mind, "The Force is with you, too. Fen."

They cleared the Academy airspace in half the time it had taken to get into it. Fen ignored the inquisitive hails from the inbound Corellian freighter and space yacht. As soon as they jumped, she fled to her quarters.

A half hour of composure later, Fen rejoined her partner in the main cabin. With ceremonial solemnity, Ghitsa was depositing her brown robe and lightsaber handle in the ship's waste disposer.

Ghitsa finally broke the silence and joined Fen at the gaming table. "It's not as much fun anymore."

"I'm not sorry to see it go." Fen scowled. "This whole trip has been a bust."

"Yes, it has." Ghitsa inserted a datacard she had been fingering into a datapad and slid it across the table. "I lifted this from Ral. What do you think?"

"Orko SkyMine? Never heard of it."

"That's what the Desilijic wanted me for," Ghitsa explained. "They were looking for someone who could tell them what Durga was up to." She rubbed her cheek where the bruise was just beginning to fade. "They were disappointed I hadn't heard of it, either."

"So what?" Fen shrugged. "It's probably just some new Hutt corporate interclan espionage."

"Scroll down a little further."

Fen moved down the pad, stopped, studied it, and then studied it again, and whistled. “Whatever Orko is, they’re raking it in and pouring it out again. It looks like the Hutts are up to something really big if this data is real.”

Ghitsa slid out of the booth to pace restlessly. “The Desilijic Clan believed it enough to track us down, sabotage your ship, and kidnap a former Counselor from Durga’s clan.”

Fen stared again at the readout on the datapad, an idea forming. “Ghits,” she began slowly, “this would be worth a lot of money to an information broker.”

Her partner visibly wilted and slumped into a cabin chair. “I was afraid you’d suggest that.” She burrowed manicured fingertips into her forehead to massage the creases there. “Who? New Republic Intelligence?”

Fen snorted. “We’d have to explain way too much to a low-level flunkie. And end up in their blaster sights for the trouble. And NRI won’t pay top credit. No, I’d take this to Talon Karrde.”

Ghitsa opened her eyes wide in surprise. “Karrde? He hates me.”

“Most of the Fringe hates you, Ghitsa. But he’ll pay good money for reliable information.”

“That’s not really the issue though, is it?”

“No,” Fen said carefully. “It’s whether you are finally willing to turn your back on the Hutts.” She rose. “Think about it. It’s your decision.”

As she was heading out of the cabin, Ghitsa stopped her.

“Fen?”

She turned slowly around, knowing that her partner of eight years was at a cusp. Even after all this time, Fen had no idea which way this would go. *Be true to yourself*, the Jedi had told Ghitsa. *What did that mean to a woman who was a con to her core and had worked for Hutts most of her life?*

“What do those numbers on the datapad look like to you?”

“They’re not what I would expect as a front for a smuggling operation or criminal syndicate.”

Ghitsa raised her eyes, and caught and held Fen’s gaze. “No, they weren’t. Numbers of that magnitude are only found in a military budget.” She hoisted herself out of her chair, moved over to the table, and removed the datacard from the pad. “Jabba made the same mistake, you know.”

“What’s that?” Fen asked, taking the disk.

“Politics. Tangling with the wrong people. Not being content with dominion in the criminal Fringe.” Ghitsa shook her head. “Call up your contact. Tell him we’ve got something Karrde will be very interested in.”

“Karrde’s got some good contacts within the New Republic.” Because there was nothing so demeaning as a futile sacrifice, Fen added, “He’ll make sure this gets to the right people.”

As she headed forward, Fen mused there should have been some acknowledgment to mark the occasion. In the twisted path of a lifetime in the moral ambiguity of the Fringe, somehow both she and Ghitsa were doing the right thing. She supposed, she thought sourly, it came from meddling with Jedi. There was nothing simple to a Jedi’s tricks. Nothing simple at all.





## About the Authors

After nearly ten years as a newspaper reporter and editor, **Laurie Burns** combined hobby with profession to start a West Coast horse magazine, now in its seventh year of publication. Branching out into writing fiction, she's had several short stories published in the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* and is currently at work on her first novel. In her spare time, Laurie likes to ride horses, climb rocks, and belly dance—though not all at the same time. Usually.

**Kathy Burdette** lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, where she is a manuscript editor for the Institute of Early American History and Culture. Although she has co-written several source articles for the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* with a mysterious, bearded rogue, this is her first solo attempt. When not fighting dangling participle in the name of academia, she enjoys spending time with said rogue and playing alternative country music through a Les Paul and a tube amplifier that goes to eleven.

**Chris Cassidy** is a freelance writer who has worked for more than ten years in corporate communications and video production. “Simple Tricks” and “Hutt and Seek” (written with co-conspirator Tish Pahl) are her first ventures into the realm of intentional (as opposed to corporate) fiction. She has spent the last three years moving about from Toronto to Guatemala to Oregon to Toronto to her current location in Colorado Springs, which is oddly enough in Colorado. She and her husband, Bob, are owned by a loony border collie/terrier. She is currently enrolled at the University of Colorado, working toward a second degree in psychological anthropology. Chris is a longtime Star Lady and a founding member of the Club Jade listserve.

**Paul Danner** originally wanted to write *The Empire Strikes Back*, but he was only eight at the time and Mr. Lucas wouldn't return his calls. So he waited fourteen more years to carve out a little niche in the *Star Wars* universe with “One of a Kind” for the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. He would go on to write five more stories for the *Journal*, as well as *Wretched Hives of Scum and Villainy*, a game sourcebook for West End Games. A recent graduate of the University of Miami with a bachelor's degree in screenwriting and creative writing, Paul spends his free time playing basketball and trying to pass himself off as Darth Maul. He hopes to one day make a name for himself writing both novels and screenplays. Are there any gold statuettes in his future? Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future....

**Erin Endom** practices and teaches pediatric emergency medicine at a major Southwestern medical school. Most of her previous writing has been for medical journals. She took a break from writing about the infectious complications of animal bites and how to recognize child abuse to create “Do No Harm,” her first story for the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*.

**Patricia A. Jackson** is an administrative assistant at Jackson (Really!) Elementary School in York, Pennsylvania. A veteran freelancer with nine published credits in the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*, she has learned much in the pursuit of the dark side. In the grip of a particular love/hate relationship with Jedi Knights—particularly dark Jedi—she enjoys exploring the sinister, less traveled roads of the Force with individuals who are no less heroic than their light-side counterparts. When not furthering the cause of the Empire, she rides and trains show horses. With a master’s degree in English, she enjoys the complexities of language and has invented Old Corellian, a rare dialect used among smugglers and Socorran pirates. Her first game sourcebook, *The Black Sands of Socorro*, was published by West End Games in June.

**Charlene Newcomb** grew up in South Carolina, then joined the navy to “see the world.” Working as a communications technician/interpreter, her “world” turned out to be Orlando, Monterey, San Angelo, and Fort Meade—her last assignment: working at the National Security Agency. After a five-year stint in the navy, and one year as a civil servant, Char moved to North Carolina, where her linguistic abilities were clearly not in demand. But the move led her to her second profession: as a librarian. Many years of procrastination (and three children and a move to Florida) later, she finally enrolled in graduate school. In 1996 she completed her master’s degree at the University of South Florida in Tampa, and now works as a serials cataloger in Kansas. She began her freelance writing career while in grad school. Her first short story, “A Glimmer of Hope,” appeared in the premiere issue of the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. Since then she’s written or cowritten ten stories for the *Journal*. The world she created for “Glimmer”—Garos IV—will be featured in *The Essential Guide to Planets and Moons*, forthcoming from Del Rey in 1998.

**Tish Eggleston Pahl** is a food and drug attorney practicing in the Washington, D.C., area. Her previous publications include professional journal articles, technical manuals, labeling and advertising copy, legislative drafting, and congressional testimony. With her co-author, Chris Cassidy, “Hutt and Seek” and “Simple Tricks” mark Tish’s first foray into the realm of science, rather than legal, fiction. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, the long-suffering Tom, their young son, Tom, Jr., and two Labrador retrievers, Ghitsa and Zozo. In her not-so-copious spare time, she is the postmistress to the America Online Star Ladies.

**Angela Phillips** works as a substitute teacher in her hometown of Hampton, Virginia, but hopes eventually to make a living as a novelist. She began studying writing at Duke University in the summer of 1982 at the age of thirteen. “Slaying Dragons” was her first short story for the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. Her subsequent story in *Journal* #9, “The Most Dangerous Foe,” told the tale of Vici of Alderaan and her final test before becoming a Jedi Knight.

As a high-school student, **Anthony Russo** was writing *Star Wars* stories long before it was considered cool (or profitable enough to be claimed on IRS Form 1040). He was heading down the dark path as your typical computer consultant when he published his first short story in *Aboriginal Science Fiction* magazine. Looking for alternative markets to break into, a friend directed him to the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. He has since appeared in the credits of a number of West End Game products, including the *Star Wars Live Action Roleplaying System*, where you can play Imperials or Dark Lords and still wake up in the morning not hating yourself. He is currently pounding away on his first full-length novel and trying really hard not to give in to his son’s pleas for a full-sized *Millennium Falcon* for Christmas.

**Jean Rabe** is the author of ten fantasy novels and a dozen short stories—among the latter a few *Star Wars* offerings published in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal*. A longtime *Star Wars* fan, her office features an old Darth Vader speaker phone; an R2-D2 cassette player that usually belts out steel drum music; a miniature *Millennium Falcon*; and a stuffed Ewok. Her other *Star Wars* memorabilia is carefully stored in the basement, which has come to resemble the cluttered inside of a Jawa sandcrawler.

**Michael A. Stackpole** is *The New York Times* best-selling author of the first four *Star Wars X-Wing* novels in which he chronicled some of the later adventures of Corran Horn. “Missed Chance” embodied three firsts: the first story about Corran, the first *published* story about Corran, and the first of Mike’s efforts sharing characters with Timothy Zahn. In addition to *Star Wars* novels, Mike has worked on and has been scripting the Dark Horse *Star Wars X-Wing Rogue Squadron* comic series. In his spare time he writes BattleTech novels, fantasy novels, such as *Once a Hero*, *Talion: Revenant*, and *A Hero Reborn*, plays soccer, and still forces himself to ride his bicycle for exercise.

**Kathy Tyers** has contributed six short stories to the *Star Wars* universe, in addition to the novel *Star Wars: The Truce at Bakura* (Bantam Books, 1994), and several vignettes in *The Truce at Bakura Sourcebook* (West End Games, 1996). Three stories follow Tinian and Daye after “Tinian on Trial,” including “To Fight Another Day” and “Only Droids Serve the Maker” from the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* (May 1995 and May 1996), and “The Prize Pelt” in *Star Wars: Tales of the Bounty Hunters* (Bantam Books, 1996). In *Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina* and *Tales from Jabba’s Palace*, she published “We Don’t Do Weddings, the Band’s Tale” and “A Time to Dance, a Time to Mourn, Oola’s Tale.” Kathy’s other Bantam Spectra novels include *Firebird* and her 1996 release, *One Mind’s Eye*. Kathy lives with her husband and son in Southwestern Montana, where she juggles science-fiction writing, vegetable gardening and orchard tending, Bible study, performing folk music with her husband, an occasional pit-orchestra gig, and developing a contemporary novel for the Christian Booksellers Association market. Someday she’ll get organized.

**Timothy Zahn** is the author of *Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, and *The Last Command*, all *New York Times* best-selling *Star Wars* novels. The first book of his two-part *Star Wars* saga, *Specter of the Past*, is currently available in hardcover; the second part, *Vision of the Future*, will be published next year by Bantam Spectra. Tim has been an avid supporter of the *Journal* and West End Games—his contributions to *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* include “First Contact” in issue #1 and “Mist Encounter” in issue #7. He also helped design and lend support to the *DarkStryder* game campaign.





# About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.